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# From counter-narratives to Cultural productions

A practice-led model to counter extremists' worldview in the cultural sphere



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## Abstract

The aim of this research is to challenge Islamic extremists' worldview and address cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere. Counter-narratives were once believed to be capable of thwarting extremists' narratives yet have been proven inefficient and even counterproductive. A growing body of evidence supports the positive effect of dramatisation of identity-related content on violent extremism. However, defining this content is neglected in literature. This research sets to identify the themes needed for this content and the language best suited to articulate it. With Egypt as its case study, the textual review of cultural practices targeted skin-in-the-game scholars producing video content to challenge extremism. Three themes common in their discourse were identified: historical narratives, women's status and minorities' rights. Following a practice-led methodology, representation of these themes was studied via a series of video-essays in films. The findings of this practice are presented in a framework for a thematic approach to cultural productions as counter-narratives. The framework was discussed with media practitioners; a model was then developed to support future practitioners in their decision-making process and consequently to define their product as counter or alternative narrative in the content development phase. Practitioners using this model will be able to define their product and select their outputs depending on their interest. The product is a counter-narrative if it addresses the transnational aspect of the Islamists' narrative and it is an alternative narrative if it focuses on promoting local identity anchored in the singularity of the national culture. The implications of this study can go beyond the media practice of counter-narratives to reach policy makers responsible for developing cultural policies and film funding bodies who finance international co-productions.

A letter to you, dear Reader

A warning before you start. What follows is a difficult discussion of a current topic. The discourse around Islamic extremism is polarised to the point that accusations can be attached to anyone who expresses an opinion regardless of his/her position on the spectrum. In the West, critics of Islamic extremism may get the 'fascist' tag attached to them - even el-Qemani was not spared (September 8, 2018) - and westerners who defend Islam are accused of the racism of low expectations, meaning they are not holding Muslims to the same standards they uphold themselves (Nawaz 2016; Box of Islam 2017). In their homeland, dissidents or Muslim reformers may face assassination (Foda, Khashoggi) or attempts to silence them via death threats (Abdel-Samad, el-Qemani) or via law courts (el-Behiri). In this climate, a real debate that has a real impact on the situation can be very difficult if not impossible.

It is worth noting that there is an important distinction between the western perception of Islam as just a religion, and the Arabic scholarship depiction - as well as the grassroots' common understanding - of Islam as a political state as well as a religion (Fatwa; el-Itijah el mouakess 2010). Distinction between politics and Islam is hard to make in the public debate (Sultan 2012). Although jihadi recruitment relies on the religious element capitalising on the Islamic 'heaven hypothesis' (Hamid 2017), the Islam mentioned here is not the religion but rather the political Islam inherent in Islamism discourse. This study is not concerned with Islam's God hypothesis, its route to heaven, the 'pornotopia' sold to its jihadi fighters (Abdel-Samad 2016) or even with how women are depicted in the afterlife, nor by how it regulates the day to day activities of the devout. What is of concern here is how the effect of this inherent political element on the civil laws shapes local culture and identity construct. It aims to understand the role that art, engaged scholarship and popular culture can play in challenging the status quo and reshaping the discourse.

Challenging extremists' narrative becomes more complex due to the reliance of moderate Muslim establishments as well as fundamentalist jihadi groups on the same texts to shape their worldview. Both defend the suitability of an Islamic Caliphate [or state] as a form of governance and of Sharia as source of laws. Moreover, most governments use Islam to claim legitimacy for

their rule: Hashimites in Jordan; Amir el mo'minin in Morrocco (Daring Question 2015; Hiwarat Hisham 2017)

In the West, Rizvi (cited in Box of Islam 2019) claims that in Western politics, the right is wrong about Muslims and the left is wrong about Islam. Indeed, the anti-Muslim bigotry hidden in the Western far-right discourses should be recognised, [recently reports of Polish far-right rally calling for Islamic holocaust were retracted (The independent 2017)] as well as the threat to Muslims' lives and wellbeing from campaigns like *Punish a Muslim Day*. However, this bigotry and fear cannot silence the debate. While conversations around this topic revolve around security, Hamid (2017) coined in a book title the underlying issue in Western discourse: *Muslim Migration and Christian Charity*.

Geopolitics and failed foreign policies may have direct impact in amplifying the appeal of extremists' discourse. However, if ISIS had limited its activities to resisting the American troops in Iraq, this project would not been needed. Instead, they established a Caliphate in a different country, bulldozed national borders, de-rooted minorities and re-established slave markets. While terrorism is not by any means cultural, this reaction to foreign interference was not observed in other cultures. This is why the cultural aspect of this extremism is addressed, out of concern for those it is affecting. When reading this thesis, you will find some of the harshest critics. Including their comments does not signify agreement, it is due to acknowledging the necessity of analysing their narrative and identify the themes they consider problematic.

Again, the Islam if mentioned here is not the religion as in the western definition of a personal relationship with a God; it is the inherent political component in it as recognised by Middle Eastern media outlets and audience even if it is wrapped up in sacred terminology.

## 1.0 Introduction:

### The thesis

This thesis consists of a practice exploration and a written exposition. Counter-narratives are the standard in challenging extremists' messaging yet empirical data on their effectiveness is lacking (Glazzard 2017; Nafees 2018; Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020). However, Ferguson (2016: 2) suggests that a growing base of evidence supports the positive impact of the dramatisation of identity-related content, reconciliation and tolerance on public attitudes and behaviour. The quest of this research is to present a practical guideline for practitioners and to fill the research gap by identifying the themes needed for content development. The findings for this research are presented as a framework for a thematic approach to cultural productions as counter-narratives aims to target extremists' worldview and challenge cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere.

Since this thesis aims to influence the nature of media practice, its methodology was conceived as practice-led. Chapter 2 details the steps followed to fulfil this process. Seven video-essays studied representation in Egyptian popular culture; their topics were identified from the textual review of cultural productions. These video-essays are the building blocks of this research's framework which was then discussed with practitioners working for leading media organisations in the Middle East. In Chapter 3, I present an overview of the practices of counter-narratives from the critical lens of Western literature as well as draw on experiences from Arabic-speaking media for a better understanding of the inefficiency claims. In Chapter 4, I discuss the seven video-essays, the product of the practice inquiry presented alongside this written exposition. The framework for cultural productions as counter-narratives is presented in Chapter 5; it offers a model for practitioners to support their decision making and the themes needed for their content development, but most importantly it gives them suggestions to consider for representations in their practice.

This section is structured under 4 headings: the problem, the context, the method and the outcomes. First, I will explain the problem of radical extremism and how it affects the social fabric before moving into more in-depth contextualisation of the frameworks already in place. The method summarises the steps followed to reach the research's outcome. Finally, in the outcomes section, I summarise the framework.

### The Problem

There are more than one billion Muslims, yet media discourse seems obsessed with a few extremists. To understand this, one must consider the idea of the minority dictatorship theorised by Taleb (2018), where he argues that an inflexible and active minority is the one that dictates the values of a society since the flexible majority tends to accommodate inflexibility. Using his wedding example, the bride and groom will have to accommodate the strict requirements of their guests whether dictated by their ethno-religious or personal choices. They would have to make sure they provide for their Hindu, Jewish and Muslim guests' alternative meats for beef, Kosher food and drink and Halal. The flexible majority would not care if they consumed Halal or Kosher drinks. Diversity and accommodating difference are possible in the wedding settings because inflexibility of the intransigent group is self-imposed and not imposed on the other (ibid). However, a Salafi grandfather will argue that serving non-Halal meat and alcohol is haram - or illegal - and would attempt to make them adhere to his religious values; a young hot-headed youngster may agree and would threaten the organisers to impose his way. The question is who is more likely to succeed in imposing his vision: a peaceful grandfather who can use the cultural values to gather support from family members or a threat of violence that their family might find extreme?

Islamic extremism (Islamism) represents a threat to modern civilisation's ideals of equality and diversity. Azza Karam (2004: 4-7 Cited Ahmed 2011: 9) defines Islamism as the 'quintessentially political agenda' of Islamising society. To be an Islamist is much more than being a Muslim: 'an Islamist must be committed to active engagement in the quest for a more Islamic and Just society. All Islamists will share this ultimate aim.'

Since 9/11, the terrorist attack lead by al-Qaeda on the Twin Towers in the US, topics like terrorism, Islamic extremism, fundamentalism and political Islam was featured in media globally. There is a consensus that Jihadi groups are born from political Islam and precisely the Muslim Brotherhood (Trager 2017; Abdel-Samad 2016; Box of Islam 2016c; El-Hadad 2017; Daring Question 2015). The Brotherhood according to Gerges (2005:2 Cited Ahmed 2011:9) is

‘the most powerfully organised movement in the world of Islam’ and they were successful in transforming Egypt, ‘the epicentre of the Islamist movement’, according to Leila Ahmed (2011:13) in less ‘than 3 decades from a majority non-veiled non-Islamists society to a veiled Islamist society.’ The organisation was created to restore the Caliphate and advocate the reliance on Sharia law in government. Islamic political groups are only considered radical if they reject democracy and adopt violence to establish their political agendas (Ashour 2010). However, the Trump administration entertained the possibility of listing the brotherhood as a terrorist organisation (Hosenball 2017; Mohamed 2019) even if the organisation is mainstream and has a presence in many countries (Arraf 2017).

The Internet enables jihadi groups like ISIS to recruit worldwide. A counter-narrative is a ‘message that offers a positive alternative to extremist propaganda, or alternatively aims to deconstruct or delegitimise that of extremist’ (Silverman, Stewart et al. 2016 :5). A consensus is reached among governments that counter-narratives will be effective in eradicating their danger (Glazzard 2017) and that the Internet is the space for de-radicalisation as well as radicalisation (Ashour 2010). Countries worldwide mobilised to counter the threat. For example, the European Union created the Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN] who sampled counter-narratives produced to address Islamic and far-right extremists. Glazzard (2017) argues that these counter-narratives are ineffective and lack theoretical basis and empirical data, hence the billions spent on strategic communication to ‘win the battle of hearts and minds of young Muslims’ have been largely unsuccessful (Schmid 2014a: 11). Nowadays there is a shift in viewing Islamic extremism as local insurgencies instead of a global phenomenon (Hassan 2018). Therefore, the role of local culture and skin-in-the-game activists should be very central to these narratives. However, this is not always the case. Taleb (2018) defines skin-in-the-game as ‘the central pillar for the organic functioning of systems, [...]. Unless consequential decisions are taken by people who pay for the consequences, the world would be vulnerable to total systemic collapse.’

Counter-narratives are reactive in their nature meaning that extremists are the one who are leading the discourse. Another consensus in literature is the necessity of an alternative-narrative with the counter-narrative (Schmidt 2014; Glazzard 2017). An alternative-narrative showcases what ‘we stand for’ instead of what we are against (Brigs, Fève 2013 cited Reed, Ingram et al. 2017 :10). Its key points are limited to promote what is important to the West, focusing on values of democracy. However, most political Islamic parties do not necessarily reject democracy even if some argue it is means to an end (Daring Question 2015).



Andrius (Box of Islam 2019f) argues that the biggest danger of Islamism is not the threat of violence, but their abilities to change the social relationship between Muslims and their surroundings. Tiflati (Box of Islam 2019b) divides extremism to behavioural (where violent extremist and illegal acts are committed) and cognitive (where thought is radicalised). Earlier in the wedding example, the dramatisation aimed to imply that the grandfather (cognitive extremism) has better chances of success in creating social change, like in Egypt, than the violent cousin (or behavioural extremism). It seems that counter-narratives like online ad campaigns are unable to change minds, but they do solidify affiliations ((Stein December 9, 2020; Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020). Hence an alternative approach is needed. Since cognitive extremism precedes behavioural extremism (Box of Islam 2019b), I argue in this research that it needs to be addressed in the cultural sphere. For that I present a framework for cultural productions that can fulfil this aim.

### The context

From Somalia to Kashmir, countries face threats of terror attacks conducted by various Islamic Jihadi groups. Although the problem is not particularly new (Egypt faced terror attacks since the 80s) the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers in the United States made jihadi groups a priority security problem. In 2014, ISIS rose to fame by abandoning al-Qaeda and declaring their Caliphate. This is a goal shared by many Islamic organisations; hence they gained support and received the bay'a [pledged allegiance] from 42 different organisations from Nigeria to the Philippines (Eleftheriou-Smith 2015). Having mastered online radicalisation techniques aided by an increased ease of reach credited to social media platforms, ISIS managed to recruit mostly youth worldwide - with 70% of their recruits age range 17-30 years old (Box of Islam 2019b) – inspiring them to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight among their ranks of 20000 fighters (Van Ginkel 2015a) or become Jihadi wives in the case of women. It rebranded itself Islamic State and introduced to the world a Qorachi as its caliph [in correspondence with Islamic tradition the ruler always should be an Arab from the tribe of Qoreich]. It coordinated terrorist attacks in Paris, Beirut, Egypt, Pakistan and London. ISIS managed to hold its fort for a long time considering that its assets are a badly trained army ranging from 20000 to 30000 against The US Army and Air Force, Kurdish forces, The Iraqi army, Turkey, The IRGC (Iranian Revolution Guard Corps) with Hezbollah and the Russians without forgetting the Syrian army and SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) (Whip 2017). Their success (ibid) is credited to the absence of central

command in the fighting bodies and a lack of coordination that will ensure their survival for the coming three years and asserts that while their military death is imminent, getting rid of them is not as easy since 'some ideas die slowly'. Western military experts recognised that they need to conduct a battle of ideas against the Islamic extremists. The US government financed PR campaigns targeting Muslims from Middle East and African heritage while the British campaigns targeted its Pakistani community living in the UK (Van Ginkel 2015). In 2019, ISIS territory is very limited. However, according to a report from central command it remains active, is 'regenerating key functions and capabilities more quickly in Iraq than in Syria' and is 'likely to resurge in Syria within 6 to 12 months and regain territory in the absence of sustained [counterterrorism] pressure' (Kube 2019).

Extremists' message is usually subsumed under four categories: political, historical, socio-psychological and instrumental; in the case of Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other Jihadi groups there is an added theological dimension (Ashour 2010). The mix and match between these elements provides a worldview that offers simplistic solutions to complex problems. It is an attractive narrative that is full of cultural and historical symbolism; therefore, Ashour (2010) argues that a generic counter-narrative cannot work (ibid). Terrorism was understood in terms of political violence and gradually became communication and propaganda. If violence coerces, propaganda persuades, and terrorism is a combination of the two (Schmid 2014). Propaganda is badly viewed in the west due to its association with Nazism and communism therefore 'democratic government uses terms like "public affairs," "public diplomacy," "psychological operations" and "strategic communications" to describe their information-based influence operations' (Schmid 2014 :1). The Pentagon's billion-dollar strategic communications against al-Qaeda was defined as 'a systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables the understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour' (Tatham 2010: 19 cited Schmid 2014: 11).

Holtman (2012: 14 cited Schmid 2014: 29) states the obvious in saying 'the jihadist propaganda will cease to be effective, if it finds zero acceptance among Muslims, which requires the development of freedom and human rights in Muslim countries and better integration policies in the West.' To be able to fulfil these recommendations, dissidence and criticism need to be

permitted in Muslim majority countries and not be punishable by death. Critics like el-Qemani received threats from extremists and called a fascist by Western intellectuals. El-Behiri, who argues that terrorism is anchored in Hadith and that it contradicts the prophets' teachings was jailed for insulting Islam following a lawsuit filed by el-Azhar for challenging their mainstream Islamic narration. Khashoggi (2017) claims that political Islam cannot be discounted from the political scenes if true democratic representation is wanted in the Middle East, a claim that recently cost him his life. While governments in many Muslim majority countries justify their rule by Islamic jurisprudence (Daring Question 2015; Hiwarat Hicham 2017) they simultaneously silence critics of Islam and arrest Islamists even if it breaches their human rights [Abdel-Nasser's regime persecuted the Muslim Brothers and they were tortured in jail, the massacre in Rabaa committed by Egyptian army when Sisi ceased power (Hamid 2016)]. These governments often control state media; hence voices of reform found a space to express their ideas on the Internet. These dictatorships utilise the threat of Islamists to justify their power grip (el-Qemani September 8, 2018).

In the jails of Egypt, the Jama'a Islamiya - Islamic Group (IG) - relinquished violence and moved away from al-Qaeda modus operandi after having trained with them. This prompted Ashour (2010; 2007) to argue that de-radicalisation is possible. He presented the first framework for counter-narratives. These ideas were developed further on other frameworks as shown in the table below.

Ashour (2010)	Van Ginkel (2015)	Tuck & Silverman (2016)
	Target audience: vulnerable individuals	Target audience: vulnerable individuals
<b>Message: Comprehensive and multi-layered</b>	Message: tailored for the identified group	Message: facts, emotional appeals of impact, satire and humour, positive stories
<b>Messenger: Credible</b>	Messenger: teachers, parents, former extremists	Messengers: credible former extremists or survivors etc
<b>Online propagation</b>	Multiplatform/ Medium	Medium

*Table 1 Counter-narratives' different frameworks*

There is a consensus in western government that counter-narratives will alter extremists' behaviours (Glazzard 2017). As Ashour (2010) puts it, successful counter-messages do not require the reinvention of the wheel, i.e. the ideas are already there. However, stemming from this framework, most counter-narratives are reactive in their nature (Schmid 2014), ineffective (Glazzard 2017) and completely neglect the attachment of the Muslim community in the host countries to their respective 'pays de Coeur' (referring to their country of origin) advocated by Benzine (William 2018). Even after recognising that this is a battle of ideas, most of these initiatives are Western-centric, with the strategic communications showcasing Muslim families living in the West (Van Ginkel 2015). There is a lot to say about the Euro-centricity of counter-narratives' conceptualisation and the vulnerability of the messenger to personal attacks and discretisation instead of enabling engagement with their ideas. However, the most important problem is that counter-narratives do reduce support for violent extremism but not in their target audience and that exposing people who are at risk of radicalisation to counter-narratives is predicted to increase their support for ISIS (Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020).

The dramatisation of identity-related content corresponds to Nafees' (2018) argument that extremism recruitment fails when the targets have an anchored identity expression. Abdel-Samad's (2016) diagnoses an identity crisis in the Muslim world due to the single-identity

construct aggregated by Islam. Secular political parties conceptualised a single identity as well: Arab, which is perceived as identical to Islam (el-itijah el-mou'akess 2012) and was adopted by Abdel-Nasser and both Baath dictatorships, Syriac adopted by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party and an Aramaic identity (el Tamimi 2017). It is worth noting that Abdel-Samad (2016) is not alone in his assertion that Islam posits itself the sole provider of identity. Shiraz Maher, a former membership in Hizb el-Tahrir, wrote with his co-author Martyn Frampton (2009:18)

Islamism (or "Political Islam") is a worldview, which teaches its adherents that Islam is a comprehensive political ideology and must be treated as such. Its proponents believe that Islam must be placed at the centre of an individual's identity, as either the overriding or the only source of that identity. The Islamist outlook is one that essentially divides the world into two distinct spheres: "Muslims" and "the rest". [...] Muslims are presumed to be members of a de-territorialised, globalized ummah, in which allegiance is defined through the fraternity of faith alone. Islamists suggest that Muslims are under constant attack, and it is this perceived perpetual danger that drives the Islamist narrative of victimhood and grievance (cited in Schmid 2014:15-16).

The Arabic media discourse does not draw a distinction between religion and politics in Islam; it is even dismissed by some Islamic scholars as a Western misconception (Fatwa 2003; el-Itijah el-Mou3akess 2012; Daring Question 2017c). Identity is an organic and complex construct, and Islamists' discourse seems to render a multiplicity of identities impossible. This is where this framework for cultural productions hopes to create an impact. Theoretically, media has now replaced the role of traditional literature and art in shaping cultural and personal identities (Dziemidok 2003). The media act as distributors of ideology, as they facilitate the imagination of a nation (Gitlin 1980) by representing the imagined community that is the nation (Anderson 1991). However due to the 'nowness' of the TV discourse, the maintenance space for this imagined community has to be cinema (Anderson 1991) where the film acts as 'identity stories' (Shapiro 1999). Historians used films to understand the mentalities and imaginary of a society. Films' national singularity is perceived immediately because they are soaked in easily recognisable currents (Lagny 1992).

## The Method

This research is concerned with counter-narratives' initiatives relying on film aesthetics. The importance of media is recognised by the Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN] which included the following in their 2012 policy recommendations:

Media production: Work with media agencies which proactively make film and TV material for broadcast channels which reach target audiences. This TV and film initiative could identify stories which challenge the extremist version of the world [...]. This material could focus on, for instance, the al Qaeda story and how it is failing to deliver on its promises to the Muslim world;

Online channel: Create an innovative online platform designed to provide pathways away from extremism for at-risk individuals (Schmid 2014: 23)

Most importantly, Ferguson (2016) argues that TV and radio dramas that address issues of identity, reconciliation and tolerance have a positive impact as long as they are not seen to be linked to a political agenda. Hence, the quest of this project became to identify the themes of content that can have that positive impact. It is designed as practice-led in order to present a practical guide or a framework for future practitioners.

To identify the stories that 'can challenge the extremist version of the world' (Schmid 2014: 25) this research used textual analysis of online content, primarily video outputs available on YouTube, and perpetuated by skin-in-the-game activists. This refers to Arabic native speakers, Muslim (or from Muslim background) apologists, scholars and critics who are putting their lives at risk to change their community. The representations of the themes identified from their discourse were studied in Egyptian popular culture. A framework for content development was then built and discussed with practitioners, directors and producers with work experience in the Middle East.

## The outcomes

Pellerin (2016:11 cited Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020) sums ISIS propaganda under 'four distinct, yet entangled narratives': (1) social (establishing a better society), (2) political (bringing a new world order through global Caliphate ), (3) religious (using the Quran to legitimise violence) and (4) moral (destroying the West symbol of moral decay). Political Islam shares these four aspects in their narratives with extremists while dropping the violence from their discourse (Box of Islam 2019). Andrius (Box of Islam 2019a) dismisses the success in destroying the West but highlights the high ability of Islamists to influence the social fabric (ibid), a success already observed in Egypt (Ahmed 2011). Bélanger et. al (2020) suggest that political narratives yield the best results for counter-narratives. This may be the way forward for counter-narratives, leaving the changing of minds or addressing cognitive extremism for cultural productions. This research proposes a framework for a humancentric cultural productions that targets cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere.

The framework is presented herein as a media strategy for content development; hence it is structured around production and distribution. The thematic content: historical narratives, women's status and minorities' rights is common to produce both counter and alternative narratives. It envisages that counter-narratives are produced by academics and shared via video-essays and documentaries. It aims to deconstruct the transnational aspect of Islamists' narrative. Alternative narratives promote a local identity construct; thus, they are entrusted to cultural practitioners to produce films and Tv series. Content stemming from this framework can be distributed on different platforms online and on mainstream media to reach a general audience.

This framework is devised with Levantine and North African creators in mind (both residents and expatriates). That said, it is by no means exclusive of anyone from any background on the condition of adhering to its fundamental principles of recognising the values of cultural and individual in the society and cherishing the cultural heritage of Muslims and other communities represented in the work. These values may seem similar or aligned with principals of cultural policies, and this research hopes it offers some ground work for policy makers to develop effective policies.

## 2.0 Methodology

Ferguson (2016) claims there is evidence for dramatic treatment addressing issues of identity, reconciliation and tolerance to have a positive impact on violent extremism. Since there were no guidelines advising on the types or themes of content they need to develop, this thesis attempts to fill that gap and present a practical guide or a framework to practitioners. It is devised as a practice-led inquiry with a written exposition. It engages with contemporary political discourses of fundamentalism, Islam and human rights as consumed on media outlets and social media. To fulfil its advertised aim, this research is therefore conceived as a transdisciplinary research following a rhizomatic approach to its methodology and terminology. Fundamentalist discourse divides the world into us/them, believers/unbelievers. A binary is advocated - in the Deleuzian-Gattari philosophy - to be the spiritual logic of the 'root book' which depends on 'foundations, linear logic, imitation, plotted points, fixed points, fixed order and a reflected image of the world' (Clarke, Parsons 2013: 38). To counter the root book, Deleuze and Gattari 'posit the rhizome book that morphs, redirects, and moves in multiple directions at once' (Clarke, Parsons 2013: 38). The selection of a rhizomatic research is due to its dynamic, non-linear, nomadic nature (Carpentier et al., 2003 cited Cammaerts 2007) where 'any point can connect to another' (Deleuze, Gattari 2004: 19) and that it 'establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles' (ibid: 7). As the methods of 'doing the research and the data or findings of the research shape the researcher identity' (Clarke, Parsons 2013: 37), becoming a rhizomatic researcher is not separate from being a filmmaker-storyteller since the research process mirrors artistic inspiration by forming solid interconnections in the interwoven web of theories that covers religious beliefs, history and their socio-political consequences as well as feminist theories and cinematic language structures.

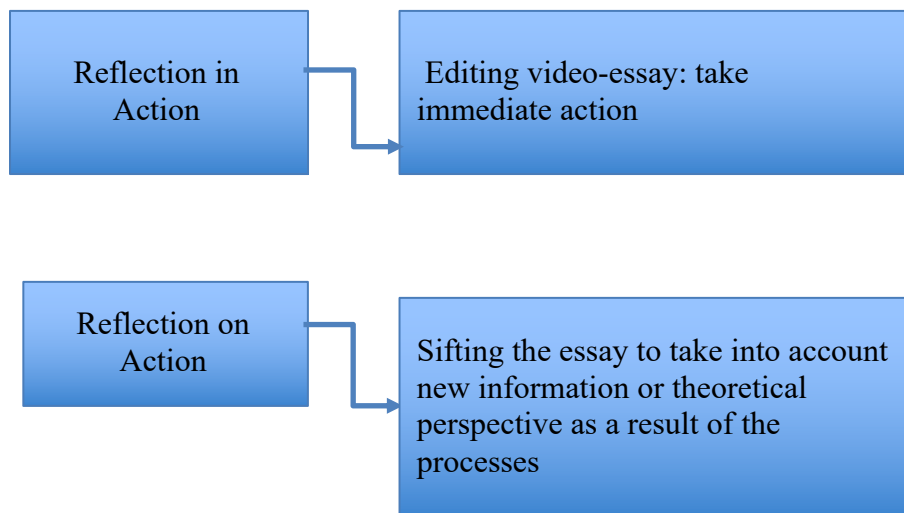
In a nutshell, the research needed to identify content relevant to the dramatisation hypothesis and define the language to articulate in order to share it with practitioners. Hence it is designed as practice-led. To identify the themes for content development, I conducted a textual review from selected cultural productions. The practice aimed to study the representation of these themes in Egyptian films in order to identify problems in representation that need addressing and attempted when possible to find creative solutions. This resulted in seven video-essays. The reflection on this practice led to formulating a framework that was then discussed with practitioners. In what follows the selection criteria and the steps followed are explained in further details.



## Practice-led methodology

Candy and Edmonds (2018: 64) defines the difference between practice-based research (PBR) and practice-led research depending on the centrality of the artefact. 'If the creative artefact is the centre of the knowledge, the research is practice-based,' and it is practice-led if the research 'leads primarily to new understandings about practices.' Since this research 'carries out studies into the nature of that practice and identifies the relative effectiveness of existing approaches from which new practice is developed' (Candy, Edmonds 2018: 65) it is designed as practice-led. One of its defining features is its foundation in practice without depending on the creation of an artefact, and it aims to share its outcomes in the form of a framework (ibid).

This framework is constructed following Schön (1994) model of a reflective practitioner. Its design is constructed as 'a conversation with the situation' based on Dewey's pragmatist philosophy (Chiapello 2017: S4172).



*Video-essays* are an integral part of the methodology of this research. The representation studies underscore the impact of Islamist narrative on the local and cultural, the main domain for this study being Egyptian films. By choosing practice-led research, this project embraces the 'experimentation in arts practices insofar as play is a method of inquiry, aiming not to establish findings by way of data [...] but to put in play elements in bricolage which afford insights through deliberate and careful juxtaposition' (ibid :109). Like most practice as research projects, it aims

to discover 'what works' or what invites critical insights through a dialogic engagement, rather than what is true adjudged by the criteria of scientific rationalism (ibid:109). Moreover, this study aligns itself with emerging attempts to solve the film analysis paradox as identified by Martin (2016) where 'a single-channel medium (written language) is pitted against an almost embarrassingly rich and profuse multi-modal form.'

The textual review informed the practice inquiry precisely on what to focus in studies of its representation, a line of inquiry that is common in media literature. Video-essays enable the embedding of the theory in practice and finding creative solutions to issues identified in literature. The video *Women in Arabia* is an example on what this research aims to achieve. In its first part, it studied the representation of women adopting a feminist critical lens. In its second part its creative exploration embodies the theories deployed in this research, particularly the poetic validity (Man 2003) in an abstract reconstruction of women as missing images. It was unrealistic to deliver more on this approach in the timeframe of a doctoral research.

#### Textual analysis:

The key, for a cultural approach, is to find the ideas emerging from within a certain community. Hence, the first step was to identify the themes that organically emerged in the discourse of skin-in-the-game practitioners. This means taking personal risks and having a personal attachment to the cause in question (Taleb 2018). *Prevent 2.0* took its current shape under skin-in-the-game experts from Quilliam among others. Counter-narrative as Ashour (2010) puts it is not a reinvention of the wheel and extremism resurfaced throughout Islamic history (Daring Question 2015; Box of Islam 2016).

All of the above favoured the selection of Native Arabic speaking practitioners. However, the counter-narratives' selection reviewed in this research is mostly of Western initiatives. This is due to availability of academic literature that defines the framework for this practice, an assessment of what is considered a success story and most importantly the lack of counter-narratives relying on film aesthetics in Arabic. Also, extremists used the Internet to radicalise the youth and Ashour (2010) claims that de-radicalisation can happen online. Abdel-Samad (2016) suggests that Zuckerberg's [as in social media] effect on Islam will be similar to

Guttenberg's on Catholicism. This meant that videos of skin-in-the-game practitioners need to be available online, hence YouTube became the primary source of data.

#### Selection criteria

To identify the themes necessary to conceptualise the framework, the data subjected to scrutiny cannot be accused of not understanding Islam or of having a shallow knowledge of the Arabic language. In this context, skin-in-the-game experts is interpreted as: a native 'Arabic' speaker favouring Egyptians (since Egypt is the case study); a practising Muslim or from a Muslim background; has engaged with the general audience; has videos available on YouTube even if they are produced for a mainstream media outlet to ensure that audience have unrestricted access to their ideas and the number of views can be identified.

The selection corresponding to these criteria is summarised in the table below. It includes a description of the shows selected. These shows have stopped broadcasting before this research concluded. It also summarises the angle followed by the scholars mainly Hamed Abdel-Samad, Islam el-Behiri, and Sayid el\_Qemani.

Program	Description	Angle
<i>Ma3 Islam</i>	<p>This was a free to air show by Islam el-Behiri on Egyptian private channel el-Kahira wal Nass. Videos are still available on YouTube. The court has ordered his show to cease its broadcast.</p> <p>Reviewed Ma3 Islam on el-Kahira wal Nass and all his articles available on el-Hiwar el-Moutamadin</p>	<p>El-Behiri presents himself as a researcher; his views are dismissed by el-Azhar as western inspired due to his studies in the UK.</p> <p>He argues that the reliance on historical texts (Hadith and Sunna) and veneration of the first caliphs are the source of violence today. However, the Prophet is a higher moral authority and that the Quran should be the compass for accepting or rejecting these texts. He also called, among others, to purge the curriculum in el-Azhar from violent texts and hate speech towards minorities</p>

*Daring Question*  
(2007-2018)

TV Show on al-Hayat TV, a Christian apologetics channel and show.

What is of interest herein is their method they follow to change minds, relying mostly on critical thinking to question the faith of the receiver without necessarily applying the same rigour to the texts they are promoting. The show relies on YouTube viewership as it is banned from most countries.

The research does not endorse Muslim conversions. Hence the research was only interested in a selection of episodes, mainly defined by the guest. Episodes with Christian conversion stories or explanation of the faith were overlooked. Unfortunately, when the research debuted the shows addressing these issues were scarce. Nowadays, al-Hayat produce historian Mohamed el-Messayeh solely on YouTube and Facebook, his show would have been preferable since his presentations delivers historical facts on the Quran and early Islam.

This channel recruit apologists who converted from Islam. The show has a defined structure. The host, Brother Rachid is from Morocco, rarely engages in performance emphasis with his guests, and never pushed his phone-in audience to pray.

It tackles jurisprudence and the Islamic God hypothesis. The show aims to demonstrate the heavy impact of Islamic texts on the society putting the blame on the texts. It relies on academic research to debunk some of the historical claims in mainstream Islamic narrative. Although the channel addresses the whole region and is not specifically Egyptian, it addresses issues relevant to the Coptic Church and community.

*Box of Islam*

An online show by Egyptian-German Scholar Hamed Abdel-Samad, distributed by his YouTube channel Hamed.TV. The show started early enough in the research process to be immediately adopted. It stopped in 2019 forcing the host to launch it under a new title. I reviewed all episodes of Box of Islam.

Abdel-Samad has a secular approach. He rejects the idea of modern life being regulated by the values of the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. He promotes critical thinking and explains academic research in his show asking his audience to conduct their own research.

Various shows with Sayid el-Qemani	<p>Sayid el-Qemani is an academic and a historian. Although he is not a media figure, his lectures and books are very sought after from the secular parties and atheist online programs (like <i>el-Bat el-Asswad</i>).</p> <p>I reviewed his TV interviews and all his articles output available in full on el-Hiwar el-moutamadin.</p>	<p>He positions himself as a Muslim historian. His angle is to find from Islamic tradition, prophetic stories that can facilitate acceptance of liberal and secular values to the general population. He claims this enables him to reach the common man who may reject discussing Islam with a non-Muslim.</p>
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These scholars follow different approaches in challenging extremism. Their outputs showcase a certain balance in offense techniques that challenge a certain set of ideas while defending others, a concept that is needed for counter-messaging according to the LIBE report (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017). The same themes and techniques, identified in the main scholars' work, are also recurrent in other non-Egyptian channels. The following list is an example of YouTube channels reviewed but were not selected for this research:

- *The Gad Truth*: A channel by Neuroscientist Jewish scholar Gad Saad, originally from Lebanon, but currently broadcasting from Canada
- *Kafer Magherabi* and *Hiwarat Hicham*: Hicham is an Atheist from Morocco; the main interest was his interviews with people fighting for change
- *El Bat el-Asswad*: an atheist channel from Egypt, the founder has been arrested
- *Fakir*: A channel with Iraqi hosts.
- *Ghayeth el-Tamimi*: A Shia Imam from Iraq who fled Iraq to the UK having adopted a critical line after being shaken with the Ezidi genocide.
- *Wafa Sultan*: Syrian Alawi doctor who joined a Christian apologist channel.

To be able to address common values between extremists, moderates and local culture, the textual analysis also considered films and extremist materials.

#### Films selection for representation studies

As mentioned earlier, the practice of this thesis studied thematic representation in films. Films act as 'identity stories' (Shapiro 1999) that help historians to understand the mentalities and

imaginary of a society since they are soaked in easily recognisable currents (Lagny 1992). Hence, despite the presence of other media in these essays, films remain the main medium to understand the society and contextualise the problems raised by the YouTuber activists.

Popular culture and national cinema affect the shaping of personal identities. Naturally, feature films are selected rather than medium or short films due to the professionalism and the rigid production structure they endure (Sojcher 2011). The selection of movies for the research aimed to ensure a wide audience reception due to broadcast repetition or a presence of a star power. A brief description of each film storyline is included in the appendix under the heading: List of films included in the essay.

According to el-Mouji (2017) nine movies are usually repeated every Islamic religious holiday. *Al-Shayma'*, *Al-Rissala* and *Hijrat al-Rassoul* are singled out in the title of his article. Hence, they are featured in the video-essays since they shaped the perception of early Islam and polytheistic Arabic in the public's eye (Box of Islam 2017a). *Al-Rissala* corresponds to the same criteria, as the director claims his movie shaped perception of Islam in the West as well since it was shown to American troops to teach them about Islam (Al-Mouji 2017).

Due to their representation of extremists, *Al-Irhabi* (Galal 1994), *Touyour el-Zalam* (Arafa 1995) and *Al-Irhab wal Kabab* (Arafa 1992) were selected for this study. The movies rely on the star power of Adel-Imam. This is also the case for *Al-Massir* (Chahine 2000). It features Nour el-Sherif, Mahmoud Hemeida, Leila Elwi and Mahmoud Mounir. On top of this star cast, Chahine received an award in Cannes which contributed to the film's marketing campaign. Ussama Fawzi's films *Bahib Issima* (2004) and *Janat el-Chayatin* (2000) are included due to their depiction of Copts. It is worth noting that *Dunia* (Saab 2005) and *Bahib Issima* (Fawzi 2004) have the star power but they were badly received by the Egyptian audience. Nevertheless, *Dunia's* subject matter is hardly represented in Egyptian cinema so it was imperative to include them in this study as an example of the contribution of the foreign funds and migrant artists in the national discourse.

Extremist media material:

Unfortunately, due to the time limitation of the PhD, and the lack of security expertise, extremist materials are not acquired first hand via infiltrating their Telegram channels. However, @Carl (2016) had shared privately with me his experience on these channels and discussions he conducted with ISIS women recruits. This has given first hand insight that could not be acquired from Jihadology, Jihadoscope or academic papers.

Case study: Egypt

Even if the conceptual nation of Islam does not recognise national borders, relying on national theory to a certain degree may prevent cognitive resistance in accepting the counter-message. This takes into consideration, political positions made in 2011 by British Prime minister, German Chancellor and French president who claimed that multiculturalism had gone wrong (Schmid 2014:5).

Egypt adopted an Arab identity and is a Muslim majority country. It is the case study firstly because it dubs itself Arab Hollywood (Khatib 2006a). The country has a strong cinema industry that is funded locally but is controlled by the government (Azzi, Tannous 2021). This cinema is responsible of the shaping of early Islam in the psyche of the MENA region. Like most states in the Middle East it is a Muslim state that mixes in its constitution Sharia law and the French constitution (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). Most importantly it is home to el-Azhar, one of the most prestigious Sunni authorities in the world, and the institution in which founders of the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda studied their Islamic degree (Daring Question 2017c, Daring Question 2015a; Daring Question 2017d). This institution is accused to have vetted a thesis of el-Mawdoudi that became the blueprint of al-Qaeda (el-Qemani September 8, 2018; Daring Question 2017). Shia Cleric Sayed Jamal el-Din (Daring Question 2017) pinpoints to al-Azhar Shia graduate who theorised Wilayat el Fakih, the system currently in place in Iran after the Islamic revolution. Egypt is also the birthplace of the Muslim Brotherhood, the organisation that is accused of inspiring all modern-day jihadi Sunni extremist groups. Furthermore, Khomeini co-wrote with the Muslim Brotherhood founders their vision for theocratic statehood (Abdel-Samad 2016). Egypt struggled with extremism since the 80s when Jama'a Islami committed assassinations and terrorists' acts on its soil. Ashour (2010) claimed they were successful in taming them to become a moderate Islamist political party. The success of this taming is questionable since they rescinded their discourse after being released from prison. Furthermore, ISIS is active in Sinai Peninsula.

It is worth noting that this research recognises the problem of Arabic as a language and an identity. Film studies use the term Arab cinema candidly to group films from different countries in the region. Khatib (2006a) uses it for Egyptian, Tunisian and Algerian cinema yet Dickinson (2016) uses it to group Syrian and Palestinian films. This tends to homogenise populations and dilute national, cultural and economic structures. Hence this research selection of film and Media mostly has limited itself to Egypt as it posits itself as Arab Hollywood (Khatib 2006a), and it was Egyptian studios that fed the whole region for a long time (Khatib 2008).

#### Interviews with practitioners

Once the framework was complete, I reached out to 20 practitioners: producers and directors working across the Middle East and serving the Egyptian market. Three people accepted to contribute. Nabil Asmar is a director working at MBC, a Saudi channel based in Dubai. Sanaa Azzi, is an independent producer who worked and lived in Egypt and produced social programming. Toni Tannous is an independent producer for advertising and social campaign manager in Dubai and the Netherlands. As Mishler suggested (1986) these interviews are viewed as a 'form of discourse' and will be conducted as 'a jointly constructed conversation of the practice' in order to achieve 'an acceptable level of shared agreement'. In these discussions, I aimed to understand how they perceived the media role in countering extremism. After gathering their impressions on the status quo, we delved into an in-depth discussion of the framework's themes and the problems this content might face focusing on representation issues and funding. Transcriptions of the interviews are included in the appendix.

#### Limitations:

This research like any other is not without limitations. The timeframe of a PhD and the limitation of the budget have put restraints on the quality of the material used in the video essays. Sourcing material that is accessible to English speakers was not always easy and translation, while able to transmit the message, does not always reflect authentically the discourse. Translating from Arabic using a translation software is tricky since there are 14 characters that are rarely written, without factoring in the differences in local dialects.



I attempted to join the AVE Network and access the resources made available to them by the Hedayah Center. However, these attempts were not successful which prevented reviewing the material available to the civil society. This restriction is understandable if it is due to security concerns; however, it may result in limiting the involvement of people from different backgrounds. Certainly, security concerns cannot be taken lightly, especially when the risk of assassination is real. Abdel-Samad's address was released by the Brotherhood in Egypt with a wanted dead or alive headline (Daring Question 2013a), the prominent journalist Nahed Hattar and a potential interviewee for this research was assassinated by the end of the first year of research, the jail sentence of Islam el-Behiri has limited the reliance on his ideas and proposals, and el-Qemani recused himself from public life out of fear of assassination and to avoid the media. All this has stirred this research's design away from conducting interviews.

It is also worth noting that deleting violent extremists' accounts can be a hindrance for research. Social media policies resulted in suspending several accounts on Twitter that were relevant to this research, like @CopticNationalism. YouTube also deleted some videos, and even suspended the channel Hamed.TV where Abdel-Samad publish *Box of Islam* episodes. However, since he is well known, German politicians got involved and his channel was restored the next day. To comply with the YouTube rules *Box of Islam* was replaced with *Box of Insan* (human).



Picture 10 Hamed Abdel-Samad tweet announcing the deletion of his channel

Furthermore, this research did not include audience research or reception in its methodology. This is mainly because it is concerned with content in the development phase of production.

Reception studies for products stemming from this framework need to be considered on a project-based basis. That said, it has noted audience comments and engagement in TV shows and YouTube videos. The impression gathered from public engagement with *Daring Question* and *Box of Islam* seemed consistent with their own assessment discussed in special episodes. Their factual approach to history, especially *Box of Islam*, resonated positively with many audience members, who sent questions and suggestions for episodes. Needless to say, there are plenty of audience members who rejected the angle and verbally assaulted the hosts on air and online. The shows seem to have gathered a faithful audience. However, more systematic and independent research into audience reception is needed. Algorithms can repress or support the propagation of the content based on the viewing habits of the individuals in question. When the redirect methods are absent for content creators, an understanding of this can have a positive impact on their distribution strategies.

## Data

After publication of the thesis, the video-essays of this research will be available on both YouTube and Vimeo. Links will be embedded on blog posts. Furthermore, these seven video-essays and the spreadsheet tracking the textual review will be stored on Figshare, the cloud-based data repository of De Montfort University.

### 3.0 Counter-narratives initiatives: A review

Reports released by RAN – Radicalisation Awareness Network – and the LIBE committee – The European Parliament Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs – assessed the success of counter-narratives initiatives. In this chapter, I review the frameworks for the counter-narratives and focus on successful initiatives identified in these reports with particular interest in those using film aesthetics to deliver their message. The criticism of counter-narratives discussed in this chapter draws on Western literature and contrasts it with the discourse of the skin-in-the-game scholars selected for the textual review.

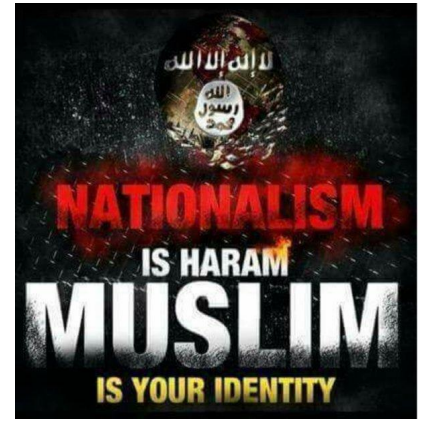
#### Definitions and Typology of Islamists:

Ashour, the scholar who produced the first framework for counter-narratives, defined the different Islamist groups. The definitions introduced in this section are drawn from his work in order to have a basic understanding of the lingo common in counter-narratives' literature and adopted in this thesis.

***Islamists groups*** are socio-political movements which base and justify their political principals, ideologies, behaviours and objectives on their understanding of Islam or on their understanding of a certain past interpretations of Islam (Ashour 2007: 598)

A ***Moderate Islamist group*** is a group 'that ideologically accepts at minimum, electoral democracy as well as political and ideological pluralism, and aims for gradual and social, political, and economic changes' (Ashour 2007: 598). They accept the concept of working in a nation-state and they are also called reformists, pluralists and modernists

**Radical Islamist groups** ‘ideologically reject democracy as well as the legitimacy of political and ideological pluralism, aim for revolutionary social, political and economic changes, refuse to work within the established state institutions, and utilise violent means to achieve their goals’ (Ashour 2007: 598). They are called also revolutionaries, extremists or exclusivists (ibid). Noting ideological and behavioural differences in conceptualising violence, this group can be divided to two subgroups: pragmatic militants who ‘perceive violent combat as a means to an end’ and extremist militants ‘who perceive violence as a sacred end per se’ (Ashour 2007: 599). The latter group, which includes al-Qa’ida, ideologically legitimizes and practice violence against civilians and unarmed people.



*Picture 1 Retrieved on 10 June 2017 from a Twitter account support to ISIS. The account was deleted shortly after. The picture illustrates the single identity promoted by radical groups*

**Radicalisation** is ‘a process of relative change in which a group undergoes ideological and/or behavioural transformations that lead to the rejection of the democratic principles as well as the use of violence, or to an increase in the level of violence, to achieve political goals’. (Ashour 2007: 599)

**De-radicalisation** ‘is a process of relative change within Islamist movements, in which a radical group reverses its ideology and begins to de-legitimize the use of violent methods to achieve political goals as well as accepting gradual social, political, and economic changes within a pluralist context’. These groups do not always abide by democratic principles [the example of the IG in Egypt]. De-radicalisation can occur on the behavioural level, which means ‘abandoning the use of violence to achieve political goals without ideological de-legitimization’. (Ashour 2007: 599)

**Moderation** is a process of relative change within Islamist groups that can take place on two levels: ‘On the ideological level the key transformation is the acceptance of the democratic principles and the de-legitimization of violence. On the behavioural level, the key to

transformation is the participation in the democratic process and the practical abandonment of violence as method to achieve goals'. (Ashour 2007: 600)

These definitions reflect that the desired change in de-radicalisation is limited to abandoning violence and accepting democracy. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) warns that accepting democracy is a means to an end for non-violent political Islamic parties who share the same goal and worldview of the violent extremists. Western literature is aligned with this observation. Fiore Geelhoed's (2011:368 cited Schmid 2014b :9) claims that 'militant groups are usually the offshoot of more moderate movements and that the difference between mainstream movements lies not in their ideology and objective, which is the creation of an Islamic state, but in what they regard to be the appropriate strategy'. Although the difference in the strategy is very important, one must not forget that most Islamic political parties' advocate that:

'Shariah (Islamic law) should be implemented, either within existing nation-states or in the context of a pan-Islamic theocracy (often referred to as the 'Caliphate'). The absence of a purist Islamic state is judged to be responsible for the current problems of the Muslim world, and only if such an entity is re-established, it is argued, will the Muslim world be restored to global pre-eminence.' (Maher, Frampton 2009: 18 cited Schmid 2014b: 16)

These goals are debated extensively on Arabic-Speaking media. Having engaged in debates defending secularity Vs. Islamic theocracy, El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) claims quite bluntly that any Muslim who considers the Quran a timeless guidebook is ipso facto a terrorist. Like many apologists' programmes, *Daring Question* (2007) showcases Islamic jurisprudence and traditions that support extremists' actions and ideology in the aim to inform many Muslims, precisely the moderates, who are not aware of their existence. These same texts are pinpointed by many moderate Muslims as problematic; one of these voices is Islam el-Behiri. Sam Harris claims that:

moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their canons in the interest of living in the modern world. Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance and it has no bona fides in religious terms, to put it on par with fundamentalism (Harris 2004 :17 cited in Schmid 2014b: 8).

Salafism is pinpointed as the route to terrorism in Western literature. Schmid (2014b: 16) suggests that

in the view of knowledgeable observers, even peaceful, apolitical, quietist Salafism can be served as an “antechambre” to terrorism, acting de facto as a “conveyor belt” by facilitating socialisation to violent extremism in the form of terrorism. In the words of the former Dutch Deputy National Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism: “for most of the known Dutch terrorists, the non-violent variety of Salafism was the first step towards acceptance of jihadist Salafism.” (Schmid 2014b: 16)

#### Causes of radicalisation

Tiflati (2016: 8-9) points to ‘major disagreements among academic and stakeholders on the meaning, nature and the threat of radicalisation’. In relation to ‘radicalism’ as an expression of political thought, the term radicalisation becomes problematic. The theories deployed here are concerned with radicalisation as ‘state of mind that precedes terrorism acts’ as defined by Mastors and Siers (2014: 379 Cited Tiflati 2016:8).

The causes of radicalisation are divided in literature to two broad approaches: the structural-psychological and the political process approaches (Ashour 2010: 600). The structural approach posits ‘a linear causal relationship in which [socio-structural] strains produce psychological discomfort which in turn, produce collective action’ (Wiktorowicz 2004: 6). Different types of socioeconomic strains include: ideational/cultural strains, where the hypothesis is that Islamists uphold religious and religio-national identities in response to ‘cultural imperialism’; and political strains, in which some argue that the more severe the socioeconomic, identity and/or other political crisis are, the higher the levels of violent radicalism (Ashour 2007: 600-601). However structural strains (in socioeconomic, political, ideational types) exist in all societies without always leading to violent radicalism. Even if most literature on Islamist radicalism is confined to this theory, it is also criticised for ‘its static nature and hence the validity of its vision of linear, casual relationships’ (Ashour 2009: 14).

The political process approach addresses several limitations of the structural-psychological explanations. Hafez (2003:19) claims that this theory is developed ‘in response to socioeconomics and psychological theories of social movement’ and that it attempts to explain

Islamist radicalism and or/moderation by ‘analysing the political environment in which Islamists operate, the mobilization structures through which Islamists acquire and allocate movement resources, and the ideological frames with which Islamists justify and motivate collective actions.’ (Ibid) The main critique for this approach is it is a catch-all approach which includes too many variables like ‘domestic institutions, regime types, international/regional actors, political cultures, and historical peculiarities’ (Ashour 2007: 602).

Recent studies gave more details on the models of radicalisation. King & Taylor (2011:609 Cited Tiflati 2016:9), ‘described emotions, cognitions, and social influences that can lead individuals to engage in terrorism’ under 5 models (featured in the table below) with two main factors that reappear are ‘relative deprivation’ and ‘identity-related issues’ (ibid).

Author	Type of model	Stages or factors
Borum 2003	Linear, progressive	1. Social and economic deprivation 2. Inequality and resentment 3. Blame and attribution 4. Stereotyping and demonizing the enemy
Wiktorowicz 2004	Linear and emergent	1. Cognitive opening 2. Religious seeking 3. Frame alignment 4. Socialization
Moghaddam 2005–2006 <sup>9</sup>	Linear, progressive	1. Psychological interpretation of material conditions 2. Perceived options to fight unfair treatment 3. Displacement of aggression 4. Moral engagement 5. Solidification of categorical thinking 6. The terrorist act
NYPD (Silber & Bhatt) 2007	Linear	1. Pre-radicalization 2. Self-identification 3. Indoctrination 4. Jihadization
Sageman 2008	Non-linear, emergent	1. Sense of moral outrage 2. Frame used to interpret the world 3. Resonance with personal experience 4. Mobilization through networks

*Table 2 Models of radicalisation Tiflati (2016:9) adapted from King & Taylor (2011) that sees radicalisation as a transformation based on socio-psychological processes. Hafez & Mullins (2015: 20 Cited Tiflati 2016:10) assert that there are four factors that lead*

Hamed Abdel-Samad (2005 cited Box of Islam 2019b) argues that several causes need to coexist over a period of time to push an individual to join an extremist militant group. Hence ‘producing cross-regional, generalisable theories of radicalisation’ is a very difficult if not impossible task

(Ashour 2007: 602). This lack of knowledge 'on why and how propaganda of al-Qaeda and ISIS attracts audiences makes it difficult to construct attractive counter-narratives' even if the audience is identified (Hemmingsen, Castro 2017: 6). However, Tiflati (2016; Box of Islam 2019c; 2019g) argues that there are two types of radicalisation: behavioural radicalisation (expressed in terrorism acts) and cognitive radicalisation. Most of the studies focus on behavioural radicalisation because the illegality of the committed acts offers a ground for operation. Thoughts - regardless of how radical they may be - are not illegal (ibid). Hence radical narratives that are taught in schools or in mosques (Box of Islam 2019e) are not illegal.

What is a Narrative?

Before diving into assessing narratives, let's start by defining it. Corman (2011: 36 cited Glazzard 2017: 3) defines a story as a 'particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes', while a narrative is a 'coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organised stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form'. Finally, a master narrative is a 'trans-historical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture.'

What is a counter-narrative?

According to Brigs and Feve (2013: 6), counter-narratives target individuals, groups and networks advanced on the path to radicalisation regardless of their passive or active involvement status. Furthermore, they 'explicitly deconstruct, delegitimise and de-mystify extremist propaganda in order to achieve a number of aims, from de-radicalisation of those already radicalised to sowing the seeds of doubt among "at risk" audiences' (Brigs, Feve 2013:6).

The idea of the counter-narrative is confusing. This is due to the term encompassing both counter and alternative narratives (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017) and that 'a common understanding of the new lexicon is yet to emerge' (Ferguson 2016: 2). Hence Brigs and Feve (2013 cited Reed, Ingram et al. 2017:10) created the counter-messaging spectrum summarised in the table below. It is reproduced from the Radicalisation Awareness Network [RAN] (2018: 422), the European network for counter-narratives practitioners:



What	Why	How	Who
<b>Alternative Narratives</b>	Undercut violent extremist narratives by focusing on what we are 'for' rather than 'against'	Positive story about social values, tolerance, openness, freedom and democracy	Civil society or government
<b>Counter Narratives</b>	Directly deconstruct, discredit and demystify violent extremist messaging	Challenge of ideologies through emotion, theology, humour, exposure of hypocrisy, lies and untruths	Civil society
<b>Government strategic communications</b>	Undercut extremist narratives by explaining government policy and rationale	refuting misinformation, and developing relationships with key constituencies and audiences	Government

*Table 3 Different types of Counter-narratives*

This thesis abides by these definitions since they are the ones adopted by the practitioners and the literature of the field. Counter-narratives deconstruct extremist narratives, alternative narratives focus not primarily on 'what we are against' but on 'what we are for' (Brigs, Feve 201: 1-2 cited Schmid 2014a: 30), and governments explain their policy and rationale. An effective counter-narrative will have elements from counter and alternative narratives (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017).

Counter-narrative campaigns became the norm and were deemed successful if they were 'comprehensive, integrated and multi-dimensional, including both offensive and defensive messages. To merely respond to terrorist groups who have relatively sophisticated propaganda strategies is both naïve and doomed to failure' (Reed, Ingram et.al 2017:12).

Alternative narrative as proposed by Jenkins (Schmid 2014a) is meant to strengthen the home front. However, he acknowledges its potential to affect the jihadist adversary indirectly and thereby it can develop a certain deterrent potential. Schmid created an aspirational list for the values and norms cherished in the West and yet to be achieved in it:

democracy, separation of state and religion, majority rule with safeguards for minorities, merit-based upward social mobility, rule of law, respect for human rights (including women's rights), pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, freedom (including freedom of thought and expression as well as freedom of religion), equality, education for all, the search for individual happiness in this world, human security, good governance, peace for all, openness to argument, readiness for dialogue, the search for peaceful solutions through negotiation and compromise, and the improvement of the human condition for all. These ideals – some of which have yet to be fully realised in the West itself – should be the cornerstones of the Western alternative narrative (Schmid 2014a: 30)

In the third category, the government strategic communication the narrative, is understood slightly differently. Narrative as understood by military experts (ibid) is a 'simple unifying easily-expressed story or explanation that organises people's experience and provides a framework for understanding events.' The military's definition is relevant herein since terrorism has been understood in terms of political violence but gradually evolved to become communication and propaganda; if violence coerces and propaganda persuades, then terrorism is a combination of the two (Schmid 2014). Propaganda is badly viewed in the west due to its association with Nazism and communism therefore, 'democratic government uses terms like "public affairs, public diplomacy psychological operations" and "strategic communications" (Schmid 2014:1). The Pentagon spent one billion US dollars for its 2012 strategic communications against al-Qaeda, which was defined as

A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables the understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour (Tatham 2010: 19 cited Schmid 2014:11).

In the fight against ISIS, the coalition established a Twitter account and engaged directly with its followers, disputing and explaining stories. The following is an example of such interaction. On the left, the BBC broke a story as an exclusive coverage of a secret evacuation of ISIS fighters. On the right, the coalition's spokesperson pinpoints that a press release was issued and sent to the BBC radio to communicate the arrangement negotiated by the SDF (the Syrian Democratic Forces) to curb extensive fighting in Raqqa.



Picture 2 Tweets from the coalition spokesperson commenting on a BBC report

## Practices of counter-narratives

This section explores trends and organisation, the frameworks of counter-narratives campaigns in literature with some example of successful initiatives before refocusing the discussion on the video-content.

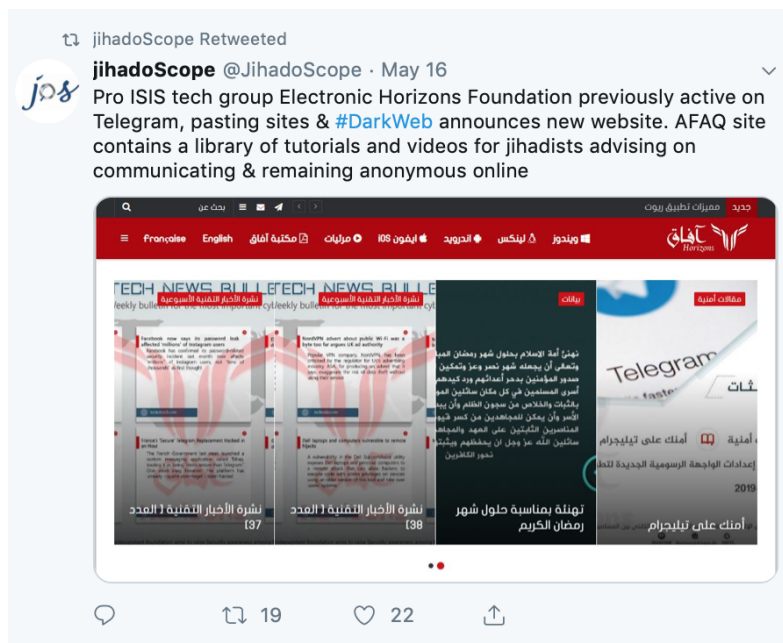
### Trends and organisations

A study commissioned by the LIBE committee – The European Parliament committee on civil liberties, justice and home affairs (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017) - thoroughly details all the international organisations that are involved in fighting Islamic extremism from the UN, NATO and the coalition fighting ISIS to tech companies and different European agencies. The report (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017: 7) categorises the practices in countering extremist propaganda under four categories:

- i. Disruption of propaganda distribution: by taking down propaganda from its source and deleting offending accounts from social media; for example, Europol and its IRU (internet referral unit)
- ii. Redirect method: Pioneered by Jigsaw and Moonshot CVE. It attempts to redirect those who are searching for jihadist material to counter-messaging in order to nudge their behaviour
- iii. Campaign and message design: Provide information and skills to civil society organisation (CSOs) to develop communications campaign typically based on counter-narratives or alternative narratives
- iv. Government communications and synchronisation of message and action: the synchronisation approach prevents exposing a narrative's "say-do-gap;" the approach 'aims to link messages and actions, and to coordinate messaging with across government and international partners' (ibid)

## Redirect and One-one-intervention

*The redirect method* relies on AdWord recognition for Google searches. It redirects internet searches to non-extremist material (Helmus, Klein 2018). Ad campaigns, mostly less than five-minute videos, are constructed in order to pierce through the extremists' narratives and support this method. The method is deemed successful (ibid); however, it can be disrupted by ISIS extremists who are experts in digital insurgency. They advise and share with their supporters tricks on how to stay safe and anonymous online and direct them to the Dark Web to access their propaganda (Jihadoscope tweet May 16, 2019).



Picture 3 Tweet from Jihadoscope divulging ISIS advice to stay anonymous online. An older version is included in the appendix

*The one-on-one-intervention* requires a former extremist to directly contact a person who is browsing extremist material. Setting aside the breach of privacy for these users, this intervention requires the target to accept engaging with the messenger. However, it is deemed successful because 'although many refused to engage with the outreach provider, 60% of those

contacted did engage in sustained contact and many made progress in addressing their extremist views.’ (Counter-Narratives.org).

#### Framework for counter-narrative campaigns

The table below summaries the three frameworks offering guidance for counter-narrative campaign creators. Ashour’s framework is the only one that predates ISIS. The remaining frameworks are published for counter-terrorism agencies. Van Ginkel is published by the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism at The Hague. Tuck and Silverman drafted the Counter-narratives Handbook for the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). The institute created counter-narratives.org that offers support in the form of a toolkit to create campaigns.

Ashour (2010)	Van Ginkel (2015)	Tuck & Silverman (2016)
	Target audience: vulnerable individuals	Target audience: vulnerable individuals
<b>Message: Comprehensive and multi-layered</b>	Message: tailored for the identified group	Message: facts, emotional appeals of impact, satire and humour, positive stories
<b>Messenger: Credible</b>	Messenger: teachers, parents, former extremists	Messengers: credible former extremists or survivors etc
<b>Online propagation</b>	Multiplatform/ Medium	Medium

*Table 1 Counter-narratives' different frameworks*

Ashour’s suggested framework is based on previous research he conducted on the Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya [The Islamic Group, IG], the largest armed Islamist group in Egypt. Against all odds, the IG declared a ceasefire in July 1997 after a violent struggle they started in the late 1970s to topple Mubarak’s regime. They ‘renounced its radical literature, published new books, and replaced its curricula with those of the relatively moderate Muslim Brothers’; this was deemed successful as ‘it took around 15,000 to 20,000 IG militants away from the Salafi Jihadi camp of al-Qa’ida’ (Ashour 2007: 596-7).

Based on this, Ashour (2010) argues that online de-radicalisation is possible and suggests building an effective counter-narrative of violent extremism on 3 pillars: (1) comprehensiveness of the depth of the multilayers of the message; (2) credibility of the messenger; and (3) promotion and the propagation. It is important to note that the IG members were in prison while this change of strategy occurred. They rescinded their reform when they were released.

As shown in the table above, his framework is the basis of counter-narratives, and recent frameworks expanded on his ideas. The ISD framework is conceived as a handbook for practitioners asking fundamental questions 'Who is your audience? What is your message? What medium are you going to use? Who will be your messenger?' (Tuck & Silverman 2016:7). But since both frameworks share a similar structure, a brief exploration of their main ideas is discussed under the headings: target group, message, messenger and medium.

### The target group

According to Van Ginkel (2015b:8) the target group includes 'sympathisers, followers, active facilitators, active believers who take the lead in debates, religious leaders, foreign fighters, former fighters, and recruiters' etc. (Van Ginkel 2015b:9). To identify this target a certain amount of surveillance may be needed where

vital elements that need to be taken into account include the profile of the target group, the question of with whom its members are in contact, the background that its members come from, the level of education or professional experience that they have, their (former) interests, and the sources used to find information (Van Ginkel 2015b: 9).

This certainly entails a certain level of expertise and funding, meaning it will exclude small initiatives and may require legal powers to implement it (ibid).

Tuck and Silverman (2016:18-19) assert that the characteristics of the audience determine all other components hence 'understanding how your audience acts both online and offline helps you to figure out who they are and how to reach them.' They advise to talk to audience, co-create with them or conduct focus group, 'research the content and profiles that your audience engage with online [...] learn from former extremists about why extremists messaging appeal to them [...] contact similar organisations or people who run similar counter-narratives campaigns.'

Both frameworks focus on addressing youth, this is because, as Tiflati (Box of Islam 2019b) points out, ISIS is a youthful phenomenon with most of its recruits' age range between 17 and 30.

### The message

The message should be tailored for the identified target group. Van Ginkel (2015b:10) suggests analysing what needs to be countered since 'the extremist narrative might contain elements that are humanitarian, ideological/religious, or identity oriented,' advises a 'multidisciplinary input in order to understand the sociological, psychological, criminological and religious elements in the narrative,' and also advises consultation with experts in communication, anthropologists and regional experts with the language used determined by the (sub)culture of the group in question.

Tuck and Silverman (2016:19-20) define a story as a message with a purpose stressing that the 'most effective message offer the audience something to think about and reflect', aiming for a strong reaction. The types of the message are 'facts from credible source to demystify and discredit extremists messages, emotional appeal highlighting impact of extremism and violence, satire and humour to de-glamorise and undermine [their] rebellious appeal, positive stories from [...] your audience or someone they admire' (Ibid).

### The messenger

Credibility of the messenger is essential in order for the message to be well-received. However, this depends on the recipients. What follows is a list of potential messengers according to Van Ginkel (2015b: 10-13):

*Government actors*, either on the central level, regional or local levels, communicate public information campaigns that focus on the Western narrative of a rule-of-law-based society that respects pluralism and human rights; also explain the foreign policy choices made, as well as the policies and measures that are adopted to address national security risks.

*Religious leaders and religious associations* are far better placed to address alternative interpretations of the Quran and other religious texts in response to extremist interpretations of Islam.

*Associations representing minority groups of migrants*, like religious leaders can communicate an alternative narrative and contribute to a public information campaign about Western values.

*Former jihadists*, after a proper rehabilitation and reintegration process, can talk from experience and share their disappointments about how they might feel misled or cheated, thus undermining the camaraderie narrative of jihadists.

*Victims of terrorism*: can counter the dehumanization strategy followed by extremists by giving a face to the victims.

*Educators* can recognise early signs of radicalization, address the problem and underlying causes in an open debate with their pupils and students.

*Family members and direct neighbours and friends*, they can pick up on early signs of radicalisation and conduct a dialogue with the individuals to address the alternative narrative and the counter-narrative.

In the same line, Toker and Silverman (2016: 11) list examples such as 'former extremists, survivors of violence, respected charities or projects [relevant to the target audience], individuals that your audience respect such as sporting figures, actors or singers, influential and respected faith community or youth leaders and activists'.



## The medium

According to Van Ginkel (2015b: 14) 'multiple platforms [should be used] at the same time and in a timely and responsive manner to events. These communication strategies thus need to aim for long-term effects and should therefore consist of a continuing output of messages'. The idea is to mirror the extremists' behaviour online while using the same keywords to ensure higher ranking in the counter-message.

For Tuck and Silverman (2016:17-18) a campaign can be one medium or a combination of two or more. It can be videos as in short films or animations, images as photos or memes, texts as in slogans, hashtags or open letters, online literature like brochures or informative posters, audio recordings such as podcasts or short audio-clips, comics like manga, short panels or graphic novels. They are more practice-oriented and suggest that videos and pictures work well on social media while text-based campaigns work better on blogs or forums (ibid).

## Example of successful campaigns

RAN's website lists different initiatives deemed successful, and their report contains a collection of approaches to practices (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2018). These approaches look into practices in schools and prisons (like *Forsee*), campaigns aimed at the far right (like *Trojan Shirt* and *EXIT* in Germany), campaigns created by the Youth in schools against radicalisation (C4C) and social media campaigns to ridicule extremism.

The LIBE report (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017) focuses on initiatives mostly created by Breakthrough Media, a public relations company that designs campaigns for RICU [Research Information Communication Unit] in the UK and the European Commission. The company's mission statement states that their campaigns 'tackle some of the world's toughest issues, helping clients counter misinformation and prevent violent extremism' which has resulted in products like the campaign *Educate Against Hate*, the multimedia platform *Ummahsonic* and a documentary titled *My Former Life* (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017:23).

The successful examples discussed below are selected from both the LIBE and RAN reports. The selection of successful is limited to the focus of this thesis. Since it is a multimedia platform, *Ummahsonic* is included. However, its main concern is discussed under the heading video campaigns. It is divided into 2 sections a- Animated short films containing *I am Abdullah X* and *Average Mohamed* and b- Live action: the lives affected which includes *Not Another Brother*, *12 Echoes of ISIS*, *My Former Life* and *La Voix des Victimes*.

### *Ummahsonic*

It is a multimedia platform that ‘celebrate[s] everything Muslim’. While the platform aims to celebrate Islamic culture, it plays directly to the single identity problems where an African Somali and Asian Pakistani are addressed as being *a priori* Muslim if not limiting the identification to being Muslim. This plays directly to Islamists’ strength since their narrative dissociates the personal identity construct from a specific land and culture and posits Islam as the sole provider of identity (Abdel-Samad 2016; el-Qemani September 8, 2018). Even if the website targets Muslims and aims to celebrate the multicultural nature of London, closer attention should be given not to feed the hate speech of the far-right (Box of Islam 2019f). For example, in a section titled *Islamic history* there is an entry titled *Five Surprising Facts about Islam in London*. It states that ‘London is a more Islamic city than much of the Muslim world put together’ (Ummahsonic 2015). The far-right groups already refer to the city as ‘Londonistan’ and claim the city has no-go zones for non-Muslims (Bawer 2018). The far right identify Muslims only by their Muslimness; this was showcased by their campaign titled *Punish a Muslim Day*. Flyers were distributed in London encouraging their supporters to pull the veils off of women’s heads.

### Video-campaigns

Henceforward, the focus is on counter/alternative narratives that uses film aesthetics in communicating their messages. This section will discuss different initiatives under two headings: Animated short films and Live action: the lives affected.

### Animated short films:

The following campaigns are considered a success despite the high cost of its production and the difficulty of its sustainability. Two projects are discussed below: *Abdullah-X* (2012) and

*Average Mohamed* (Ahmed 2015). Since these videos have the most watch viewership on YouTube, they will feature as example in the discussion of framework.

*Abdullah-X:*

This is an animation initiative launched in 2012 in the UK. YouTube shows 1679 subscribers and 22 videos with the most recent dating back to 2016. The character is a young Muslim with changing appearances who can be 'anyone struggling with issues of identity, faith, belonging, a sense of duty, grievance, injustice, confusion etc.' (Radicalisation awareness network 2018: 429). Abdullah does not just address extremism; he speaks for young Muslims as well.



Picture 4 A screenshot from YouTube representing the character Abdullah-X

For example, in the video addressing the Charlie Hebdo attacks, when extremists gunned down and killed the cartoonists in the French satirical magazine for drawing the Prophet, Abdallah complains about the world wanting him to stop his life and apologise for extremists' actions while he has his finals to worry about on top of everything.

*Average Mohamed:*

The campaign was launched in the USA in 2015. The YouTube channel is multilingual (English and Swahili) and shows 763 subscribers and 29 videos. It is also available on their blog, Facebook and Twitter. The initiative states that 'it takes an idea to defeat an idea'. *Average Mohamed* according to its creator is 'a counter-ideology mechanism that uses the creator popular culture engine tools to prevent indoctrination at the point of inception'. *Average Mohamed* is a likable middle-aged figure.



Picture 5 Average Mohamed screenshot from YouTube

However, he might come across as slightly preachy. In the slavery episode, the core value advanced is slavery is bad this is why it is banned in most of the Muslim world. He continues asking the viewer 'who do you want to be like: Muslim governments or ISIS?' It is worth noting that extremists accuse the governments of the Muslim world of apostacy (el-Qemani September 8, 2018; Ahmed 2011). ISIS was upfront in its support to slavery

restoration, their justification relied on the 70 Quranic *Ayas* [Quranic Verses] regulating it (el-Qemani September 8, 2018).

Live action: the lives affected

This section describes: *My Former Life*, *Not Another Brother*, *12 Echoes of ISIS* and *La Voix des Victimes contre la radicalisation*.

#### *My Former Life*

*My Former Life* is a documentary featuring four stories of former jihadists and was commissioned by the Peace Foundation. However, the documentary is not available for open access and the Peace Foundation has a restricted access for members only. This raises the question whether the initiator of this approach has real confidence that it will deter on its own without it being contextualised in the classrooms.

#### *Not another Brother:*

This is a short art video by Quilliam launched in 2015. The short version at 1'41" has been viewed more than 67,000 times. In contrast of ISIS propaganda films where the fighters are filmed walking in the sunlight, *Not Another Brother* features one man hiding from the bombs in a bunker. The voiceover narrates a letter from his brother regretting getting extremist material home. The caption on the YouTube channel asks viewers to share the video and 'to show ISIL that their extremist views has no place in our community.' The channel also features *Negotiate*, a short video that quotes teenagers' words about pressures and factors (social media, identity, sexuality, faith etc.) that might make them vulnerable to poisonous ideologies. It is attached to a funding campaign that gathered 6% of its target budget.

#### *12 echoes of IS:*

This is a web documentary available on a YouTube Channel. The film clips feature 12 people whose lives has been affected by ISIS. The stories vary from Syrian refugees in the Netherlands who fled Raqqa and Aleppo, to a Dutch national who survived the shooting in Paris.

### *La voix des victimes contre la radicalisation (AFVT)*

L'association Française des victims du terrorisme (AFVT) launched this online campaign 'to amplify the voices of survivors and tell their stories in order to counter the dehumanising narratives of extremists' (Counter-narratives.org). However, if little attention is given to the representation of these groups' cultural heritage, this angle can risk anchoring the victimhood into the narratives of these groups and rendering it a prominent feature of the perception of their identity.

### Criticism of counter-narratives

Hemmingsen and Castro (2017: 20-21) suggest that the focus on narratives and counter-narratives is tied to the assumption 'that becoming convinced by an ideological cause [intellectual radicalisation] is a process through which the individual or group is manipulated or even brainwashed with misinformation'. Therefore, the counter-narratives intend to correct misunderstandings and lies. The authors acknowledged it may be the case but warned against overestimating these cases. They added if individuals are using the ideology as means to an end then providing them with another course of action works better than narratives (ibid). However, even in cases where addressing the ideology or the narratives may be relevant, 'it is unlikely that doing so in a confrontational manner by correcting, exposing or ridiculing it will have the desired effect' (ibid).

Furthermore Glazzard (2017: 16) argues that 'policy makers and practitioners need to look beyond their tools of strategic communication, public diplomacy and social media campaigning, and rediscover the potential of cultural production - including literature - in offering an alternative to the seductive creativity of violent groups.' Glazzard argues counter-narratives gained a consensus among policy-makers and civil society practitioners and are largely produced by these groups rather than academics; therefore, they lack a fully articulated theory and very little evidence supports them (2017:3-5). Counter-narrative theory reflects a broader set of assumptions 'particularly pronounced among governments about the causal factors of extremist violence' and that there is a

wont to emphasise ideology, especially ideology deriving from overseas as the principal source for the corruption of the minds of those who turn to violence. By leaving out other factors or explanations, from socio-economic grievances to the lure of adventure to the primary human need for survival, the ideological explanation is at best a gross over-simplification (Glazzard 2017: 6)

Even counter-narratives as a notion is ambiguous according to Reed, Ingmar and Whittekar (2017:10) since it can refer to

government-led initiatives, de-radicalisation strategies, or grassroots and civil society movements and can be speaking to a number of different audiences – such as extremists, those vulnerable to extremism, members of communities that include extremists, or the general population at large.

Their criticism revolves around three points: the novelty of the field; the non-conclusive nature of the correlation between exposure to extremist content and committing violent activities; and the defensive nature of counter-narratives.

Recognising that the study of counter-narratives is a new field, the authors (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017) highlight the gap between the volume and quality of counter-narratives produced in comparison to ISIS' sophisticated propaganda. Van Ginkel (2015) noted this problem and suggested that training needs to be provided for the practitioners.

The correlation between exposure to extremist content and future violent extremist activities is inconclusive. Kate Ferguson (2016: 9) states that

the picture is somewhat mixed: while there is some evidence suggesting patterns of discourse and communication such as hate speech, dehumanisation, and identity-based narratives (or propaganda) can contribute to conditions where IBV [Identity Based Violence] or VE [Violent Extremism] becomes more likely, the causal relationship remains unproven.

So, in term of empirical research in terrorism studies, 'not all those who develop extreme beliefs become terrorists, and that many terrorist actors do not "radicalise" in any traditional sense' (ibid). Reed, Ingmar and Whitekar (2017:11) point to the length IS goes to in order to create their propaganda and stress the great deal of evidence suggesting that messaging has an effect

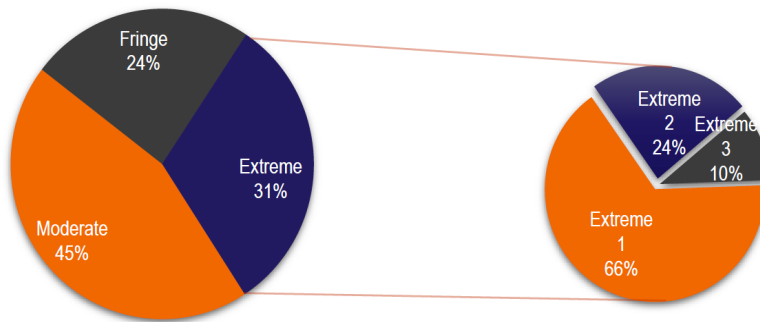
on consumers' recruitment prospects since this is the premise of TV advertising. It is worth noting that TV advertising has a predefined product to sell and arguably ISIS posits itself as a product with the tag line 'Baqiya wa Tamadad' (Remaining and Expanding). This is not the case for counter-narratives as Nafees (2018) defines them as:

public service announcements that will likely have the same impact as anti-drug PSAs, which have been shown to have no effect in the short-term and may even have adverse effects in the longer term. And alternative narratives are essentially advertising with no product to sell: even if the messages reach and resonate with the target audience, if they subsequently do not offer the viewer something they can actually do, or some offline group they can actually get involved with, then the resonance will wear off with no change in behaviour.

The defensive nature of counter-narratives means that it can barely respond to the opposing messaging, allowing it to set the ground for the communication battle to control the narrative (Reed 2017 cited Reed, Ingram et al. 2017 :12). As discussed earlier, the advice given to practitioners directs them to respond and even to co-create when possible. To identify content, they are advised to 'carefully consider the message and ensure you know precisely how your content will convey it. Consult your audiences if possible' (Tuck & Silverman 2016:19). This suggests that practitioners are creating content in response to their perception of radical media consumption.

#### Radical media consumption

In the early stages of this research, I sought to understand how radicals approach recruits in general and women in particular in online forums. @Carl (2016), a Kurdish activist who infiltrates jihadi channels, asserted that the first contacts were always benign discussions about Islam, how to be a good Muslim without any reference to violence. Violence is present in the media consumption of convicted extremists in the UK, i.e. those who were planning to carry out domestic attacks, but it is only 31% of their consumption (Holbrook's 2017). This figure below summarises Holbrook's (2017:13) findings.



*Figure 1 Percentages of violent material in the media consumption of ISIS recruits. Figure 3-b (on the right) gives a closer look on extreme material. Extreme 1: limited to combatants; 2: justifies violence on civilians and 3: specific targets.*

Moderate material did not promote hatred or endorse violence; fringe material perpetuated isolationist material and hatred towards outward groups with no reference to violence; extreme material was an endorsement and glorification of violence in the modern context and was divided to three levels, with Level 1 mentioning violence vaguely or limit it to combatants, Level 2 justifying violence against civilians, and Level 3 going further to give specific facilitating details such as the preference of specific targets (Hollbrook 2017: 8-9). These media publications were in 'different formats: published written material (including books, pamphlets and articles published online); audio recordings; and video content' (ibid). The prominence of audio content (sermons and Arabic Nasheeds with English subtitles) remained consistent throughout the cases, and user-generated videos from YouTube increased in popularity (Holbrook 2017: 11-13). Although fundamental, this research leaves some questions unanswered, particularly to how these texts - violent and non-violent - interrelate to construct the extremists' worldview.

#### Counter-narratives framework

This section discusses the framework component, focusing solely on how it affects the video outputs of counter-narratives. It contains four headings: content and target audience, message, messenger and online propagation.



## Content and target audience

The guidelines usher practitioners to understand their target audience's behaviour online. It presumes that understanding extremist online consumption facilitates creating counter and alternative narrative. These are the titles of the videos posted on *Average Mohamed* YouTube channel: (1) *What does the Quran say about suicide bombings?* (2) *Boston Strong*, (3) *Islamic state job description*, (4) *What does the Quran say about ISIS?* (5) *What does Voltaire has to do with Charlie Hebdo?* (6) *A Muslim in the West*, (7) *Identity in Islam*, (8) *Be like Aisha*, (9) *What does Islam have to say about slavery?* (10) *The bullet or the ballot*, (11) *Being A student video*, (12) *Dealing with Islamophobia*, (13) *Immigrants video*, (14) *Soccer star*, (14) *Family video*, (15) *Save the world*, (17) *Car homicide and Islam*, (18) *Madness*. *Average Mohamed* is mentioned herein since it is still posting videos with the latest one addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

While the campaign creator claims to address radicalisation at the point of inception, its output seems to focus more on behavioural extremism. The plurality of these videos explicitly tackles violence when the plurality of the texts consumed by convicted violent extremists is non-violent and even 'condemns the use of violence' (Holbrok 2017:14). Tiflati (Box of Islam 2019g) explains that the law presented a framework to address behavioural extremism since violence or joining an extremist group is illegal. Most fighters recruited by ISIS are under 30 years old, therefore there is plenty of advice to target young age groups. Naturally, migration to Syria was a topic that was treated by both animation counter-narratives. It is undeniable that the proto-state established as a Caliphate in the promised land constituted a pull factor (Box of Islam 2019g). El-Qemani (September 8, 2016) states that Shahada (martyrdom) is the only guaranteed way particularly in Sunni Islam to be admitted in heaven. Yet this heaven hypothesis is mostly discounted from the radicalisation studies (Hamid 2016). However, according to Imam Zaid Shakir (2016) 'one of the most powerful recruiting tools of ISIS has been its ability to create an apocalyptic appeal around the prophesied destruction of a "Crusader" army at Dabiq.' ISIS named its first magazine after the town in Northern Syria with a clear reliance on the geographical location. It will be difficult to foresee if land grabs will be the route to follow in the post-ISIS era; however, as their land eroded, they are expected to 'be brilliant at digital insurgence' (Twitter @Gluck 6 Feb 2016).

Going forward, counter-narratives are a communication tool which will need to adapt to the extremists' changing discourse, particularly in the West. Said Shoaib, an Egyptian journalist,

founded the Canadian Institute for Islamic Studies to track the Muslim Brothers and other extremists' offences against Muslims and non-Muslims (Al-Ain 2020). He points out that even though the violence discourse is avoided in Canadian extremists' mosques, the country hosts one of the eight most radical mosques in the world (Box of Islam 2019e). However, the non-violent material available in these mosques and Canadian public libraries promotes political Islam's worldview. To pierce through this narrative, he donated some books to the public library; the library returned them under the banner of Islamophobia. Shoaib and Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2019e) both point out that the funds of political Islam and their activism in the public sphere have posited Islamists as the speakers of Muslim community.

Democracy features in Schmidt's list reproduced earlier as well as counter-narratives reviewed for this research. Separation of state and Islam is very difficult due to the inherent political element in the doctrine as well as the ongoing attempts by political Islam to reshape the modern state upon the model of the confederate established by the religion's founder (el-Qemani September 8, 2016). Furthermore, moderate political parties seem to be very successful with the public (Ottaway, Muashar 2012). Khashogji (2018) claims that true democratic representation cannot exclude from political Islam from the political process. The Bullet or the Ballot video asks Muslims to make a choice between the bullet, the knife, the bomb or the ballot. Naturally, it promotes the use of the ballot 'because we are Muslims not fools.' El-Qemani (September 8, 2016) claims that many political Islamic parties see democracy as a mean to an end, which is to reach the government. Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2016l) reminds his audience that people voted for the Iranian theocracy despite Khumaini's prior publications of his vision and plans. Taleb (2018) argues that an inflexible minority needs to be around 11% to win an election due to shared values with the flexible majority. This goal is easily achievable for Islamist parties as demonstrated by the events after the Arab Spring. So is the likelihood of a post-democratic power grab by an Islamist party being considered and how it might affect people's lives and their human rights?

Schmidt's list aims to challenge a worldview organisational structure instead of a narrow focus on the violence. While addressing a worldview, campaigns need to be more subtle than the counter-narratives' discourse. Otherwise campaigns tend to be dismissed by the intended audience as a 'deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Schmid 2014a:6-7). Unfortunately, this was the reaction of the counter-narratives' intended audience (Bélanger, Nisa et al. 2020).

It is worth mentioning that voices of victims like those documented AFVT can keep running for years to come, considering the amount of suffering ISIS inflicted. While the damage that ISIS inflicted on certain communities should be discussed and recorded in historical records, victimhood cannot be the sole defining factor of any community. Dehumanisation of certain communities can be fought with promoting their culture, particularly the Yazidi community [as commonly spelled in Western media referring to Êzîdis in Kurdish and Izidiyin in Arabic, an ethno-religious minority of Iraq. They should not be confused with the Yazidiyin in Arabic, an Islamic group].

Eagleman (2018) claims that the brain craves novelty so it loses interest when presented with the same thing over and over again, even if that novelty it craves should be anchored in the past or the familiar. This concept is very familiar in addressing consumption risk in film industry and the reason why successful formulas are replicated for a limited life cycle or until the next hit emerges. Even if their content is reactive to their audience's interests, this still may cause a problem for counter-narratives. Terrorism and Islamic extremism topics are not novelty topics to begin with since they have been discussed globally since the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Most importantly, as the offer of content is having a negative effect on its target audience, the question should be raised if that content is adequate to begin with.

#### The Message:

The website Counter-narratives.org presents a toolkit for practitioners to develop a message. It advises to offer their target audience something to think about and reflect on, instead of lecturing them. This message can

- deconstruct, discredit and demystify an extremist message with facts. Make an emotional appeal to the audience to consider the impact of extremism and violence. Undermine extremist propaganda through satire or humour. Choose a specific aspect of an extremist narrative to counter or undermine. Offer a positive alternative message or narrative (Counter-narratives.org).

From a practical perspective, deconstructing a lie requires way more time and structure than the lie itself. For example, the moon landing is considered by some to have been faked as the

flag can be seen flapping. Despite the live broadcast, some people still discredit the moon landing. While these claims have been discredited, the Royal Museums Greenwich's website still has a page debunking this conspiracy theory. In the flag case they had to explain that NASA had set it up that way and points to the telescopic pole extended to hold it together which is actually visible in the picture (Royal Museums Greenwich).

Since extremist counter-narratives are not new (Ashour 2010), Islamists' knowledge in the subject matter can predispose them to ready-made convincing answers to their followers. Hadaya Centre (Zeiger 2016: 3) claims that 'these counter-narratives refute and dismantle the religious and ideological elements of the violent extremist narratives, utilising religious texts and religious leaders to refute religious claims.' On face value this is ideal according to Paul Graham's essay on how to disagree. He places refuting the central point as the best way to disagree. The figure (Ratner 2018) below shows an illustration of the hierarchy of disagreement. However, refuting misinformation is difficult enough with factual evidence. Sharot (2017) claims that people have the ability to spin even factual evidence to reaffirm their existing belief. This stemmed from an experiment where researchers shared facts and information about climate change with two distinct groups of people; they noted if the facts did not coincide with existing beliefs then they were disregarded, however, in the opposite case it makes their existing beliefs more extremist (ibid). Religious beliefs may be more challenging to refute than factual data.

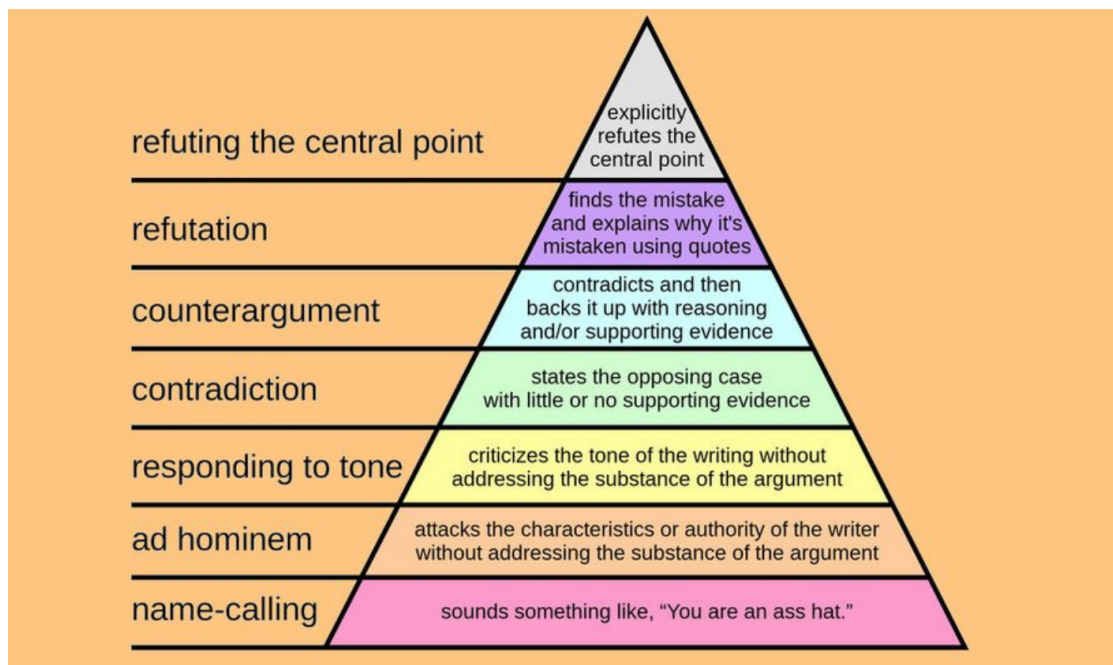


Figure 2 Hierarchy of disagreement according to Paul Graham (Big think 18 March 2018)

Abdel-Samad (2016) points out that extremists' narratives are anchored in the Quran, jurisprudence and historical practices. Hence when attempting to refute their claims, they have the upper hand in their presentation since they do not need to cherry-pick verses to support their claim (ibid). This caption from *Abdullah-X* (YouTube 9 October 2014: 1'31) highlights this problem. Responding to his question 'in between the Islamophobia and the Fatwa bots there is actually something for us young people to aspire to?' and the answer he gave is 'it's the Sunnah... It's the way and actions of the beloved...'



Picture 6 Abdallah-X Extract from the video titled *Road of realisation part 2: Islamism*

Many argues that Islamism is born out Wahabism and the Muslim Brotherhood (Daring Question 2016; 2016i; Ahmed 2011), with Ibrahim (2015) claiming that there is a historical evolution that links el-Baghdadi (ISIS) to el-Najedi (founder of Wahabism). Salafism is the main ideological drive behind Islamism; their core principle according to Mansour (Daring Question 2011r) is to follow the footsteps of the Prophet in actions and lifestyle as narrated in Hadith and Syra. This is the message of *Abdullah-X*. Despite the difference in their discourse, both Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2019) and Sultan (2011, Daring Question 2013aa; 2015ai) put the responsibility of creating ISIS on Mohamed himself.

Reform is presented as the solution, drawing on the history of reforming Christianity. Ayan Hirsi Ali (2015b) calls on the US to support Islamic reform due to her belief that Islam is a threat otherwise. According to her, this endeavour is challenging because of (Ali 2015a, 2015; 2015c) Islamic teachings as well as its decentralised structure of power vs. the hierarchal centralised structure of the reformed Catholic Church. Ramadan (92nd Street 2010) cites this decentralised structure as a hindrance to reform. Abdel Samad (Box of Islam 2017b; Box of Islam 2017c; Box of Islam 2017d; Box of Islam 2017; Daring Question 2017a, Daring Question 2017b) believes that reform is a futile endeavour, nevertheless he debated the topic with Mohannad Khorshid leading to publishing their exchange of ideas in a book and in a series of episodes in his show. The dialogue between Abdel-Samad and Khoreshid summed up the status of the discourse: reformists accuse critics of adopting, like ISIS, the most radical interpretation of Islam; critics accuse reformists of whitewashing Islam and cherry picking what supports their argument without being truthful to the text (ibid). Abdel-Samad (ibid) questions the success of the Christian reform experience since it fragmented the Catholic Church and led to the birth of new

Christian sects. He also questions the logistics of carrying out the reform considering the power that political Islam holds as well as the resistance it may face from Islamic religious institutions since they consider Ibn Taymiya, Salafism and Wahabism as reformist (Box of Islam 2017ag; 2017ah). The modern-day reformists are mostly Western based (Khorshid) or studied in the West (El-Behiri).

When discussing Jihad in *Madness, Average Mohamed* simply called out the madness of going into a Kosher shop and shooting peaceful Jews who did not harm anyone. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) recounts that when he was in school, preachers from el-Azhar taught his generation that Jihad is the struggle to get closer to God. Enlightenment ideas, crucial to the Catholic experience, are already present in Islamic traditions (Box of Islam 2019h). Assid (Daring Question 2015ah) argues that the Muslim Brotherhood took over el-Azhar and these enlightenment discussions were aborted. More recently, President el-Sisi gave a speech in el-Azhar (28 December 2014) asking for 'tajdid el khitab el-dini' or reforming the religious discourse. The call divided opinions. Some applauded it as necessary, some voices questioned the suitability of el-Azhar to conduct reforms and still others, like Coptic activists Majdi Khalil, dismissed it entirely as a stunt to appease the West (Daring Question 2016f). El-Azhar did respond to the president's call and purged the curriculum, but according to el-Behiri (Kol Yom 2016a; 2017a) they only deleted references to cannibalism and absolved themselves from taking further steps. Therefore, a reform as understood in the Eurocentric experience of the Catholic Church is unlikely. This unlikelihood, according to Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019a; 2019b; 2018h) is due to the West having a Church, but the Muslim society being the Church and the lack of the enlightenment foundation to enable Islamic reform.

However, little attention is given to a concept that occurred organically in Islamic history which is Ta3til, an approach pinpointed by Brother Rachid (Hiwarat Hicham 2017). Ta3til simply means suspension, which entails considering some *Ayas'* ruling irrelevant or incompatible with our modern life. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) cites the organic suspension of 72 *Ayas* in the Quran that regulate slavery. This embodies Haris' (2004 :17 cited Schmid 2014b: 8) definition of moderation discussed earlier since the majority of the Muslims accept the abolition of slavery. However radical groups like ISIS believe in abiding by all the rulings eternally, hence they brought back this practice and enslaved, raped and sold Yazidi women in markets and drove this community to near extinction. Like all other religions, Islam is clashing with modernity (Abdel-Samad 2016). The desire to reconcile laws regulating old Arabia with modern dates can be found among moderates too. For instance, a scholar from el-Azhar issued a fatwa decreeing

woman in the workforce should breastfeed their male co-workers (Al-Bawaba 2007; Daring Question 2007; Ashraf 2019). It drew heavy criticism and al-Azhar abolished it.

It is worth noting that Mahmoud Taha, a Sudanese Imam, already gave Ta3til its theoretical framework. He advocated that timelessness of the Quran is in the universal teachings of Islam found in the Meccan verses and that the violent sword verses of the Medina were a special case only applicable to the Prophet (Daring Question 2015g). However, Taha was tried and found guilty of apostasy which is punishable by death. El-Azhar was accused of being responsible for Taha's death upon a fatwa they issued concerning him on 6 May 1972 (ibid). The institution is now asked to apologise for their role and retract the Fatwa (al-Taghyeer 2020). It is worth noting that both Shia and Sunni Islamism refer to the same text; the difference between the two lies in the blood lineage of the ruling elite on the Caliphate (el-Tamimi 2018a; 2018b).

The messages of counter-narratives such as *Abdullah-X* rely on the peaceful Quranic verses to challenge behavioural extremism. Extremists can undermine their messaging by using the concept of abrogation, which means newer verses repeal older ones. Abdel-Samad (Daring Question 2016) pinpoints that *Ayat-Assayf* - the 'sword verse' (9:5) which commanded to fight non-believers - is the last one revealed, and abrogation therefore means it is the ruling to follow. Furthermore, refuting extremists' claims or even challenging abrogation requires transparency. However, according to Mahmoud Rasmi (2018) 'Islamic preaching is a bit convoluted, because it takes different forms when it is taught internally to religious people, versus when it is professed externally vis a vis non-Muslims.' This is another layer that counter-narratives might have to consider on top of the necessity to adapt to the changing discourse, address non-violent Islamism (Box of Islam 2019e, Schmid 2014) and possibly engage with extremists' counter-messaging. Since moderate Islamic institutions uphold the idea of abrogation and refuse to question the depiction of the Prophet in Hadith and Syra, the narrow focus on certain aspects of the Quran can be dismissed by its intended target.

The messenger:

The three frameworks stress the importance of a credible and trustworthy messenger. Bestowing a face on a campaign has merit considering the disparity in numbers of Twitter followers of Majid Nawaz, a former extremist, and the organisation Quilliam he co-founded

(182,000 vs 49,000 retrieved on 20 February 2018). However, Nawaz is a frequent panellist on the BBC and has his own radio show on LBC. Hence, deeper reflections need to be made on the role played by mainstream media beyond reporting the news and keeping the public informed as suggested by Van Ginkel (2015) in her framework.

Ashour (2007) relates the pride of Egyptian government when they successfully ‘tamed the lions’ of IG. He attributes IG’s change of heart to receiving the message from a messenger they know and trust (ibid). This successful experience underpinned the belief that if the message is delivered by a trusted messenger then it will de-radicalise as well as deter. While it lasted, this peculiar change of heart took place while members of IG were in jail following a harsh crackdown from the Egyptian government. This controlled environment may have ensured the safety of the messengers or at least a limited engagement from their audience. Replicating this setup successfully with a limited number of persons might be more aligned with theatre experiences like Odd Arts in the UK or even Lucien Bourejeili in Lebanon.

While counter-narratives’ videos are produced for an intended audience, once they are online little control can be had on who views them. As observed in the media discourse, once a status quo or a certain narrative is challenged or criticised, the speaker is subjected to discrediting tactics. From Facebook to the NRA, the tactics are similar even if the content differs. Graham (Ratner 2018) defines argumentum ad hominem as when the characteristic and authority of the person is attacked and not the substance of the argument, and name calling is when personal insults are deployed. Although he puts them in the bottom of the pyramid in Figure 3, these techniques can deter many from engaging in the conversation. Van Ginkel’s list of messengers includes parents, teachers, educators and former extremists. Some are more vulnerable than others to discreditation. Certainly, as an authority figure in the classroom the chances are less for teachers to be abused than messengers engaging online. The following sections look at the techniques deployed in the public domain and extremists’ private messaging channels.

#### *In the public domain*

In order to challenge an ideology or to reform a religion, critical thinking and voicing opinions needs to be possible. Islamists issued death threats to many people who dared to talk about them: Sayid el-Quemani (September 8, 2018), an advocate of a secular state over an Islamic theocracy, had to retract previous statements to protect his family. Film star Adel Imam received several threats for portraying a violent extremist in *The Terrorist* (Dunia el-Watan 2017). After a



lecture on Islamic fascism in Cairo, an Imam called for the death of Hamed Abdel-Samad, a political scientist, writer and host of Box of Islam on YouTube; they published his address in Cairo and he is now under police protection in Germany (Daring Question 2013b). Following his book on terrorism in the 1980s, Faraje Foda was assassinated; an Imam from el-Azhar, and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, defended his killer (Ahmed 2011).

Moderate religious institutions, such as el-Azhar, rely on refined ways to suppress criticism. They dismiss the premise of the argument as old news and that this criticism to Islam has been dealt with. They dismissed Islam el-Behiri's ideas claiming it is plagiarised from an American who used to reside in Cairo (Allah A'lam 2015). They used the Egyptian justice system to repress his criticism. Two lawsuits were filed against El-Behiri. He was found innocent in one court case and guilty in another; he was sentenced to five years in prison, serving only one before receiving a presidential pardon in the last 40 days (Daring Question 2016a; Kol Yom 2017b; 2016a; 2016b). The poet Fatma Naout was sentenced to serve one year in jail and pay 20,000 Egyptian pounds for a tweet criticising a mass animal slaughter to celebrate *Adha* (ibid). While Arabic speakers must deal with Islamic-related pressure, Western based critics and messengers face other types of pressure from left and right. As a former extremist, Majid Nawaz, the founder of Quilliam and a radio host on the British radio station LBC is a perfect example of messenger; he received death-threats from Islamists and is under police protection.

Moderate Muslims constantly find themselves stuck between extreme Islamist movements and the far right (Rasmi 2018). Unfortunately, Muslim critics find themselves de facto allied with the right and far right movement. For example, Ansaf Haydar, the wife of Raef Badawi the imprisoned Saudi blogger, tweeted congratulating Tommy Robinson upon his release from prison following a UK court conviction of hate speech. This is giving the far-right discourse legitimacy and presenting them as defenders of their identity. Bawer (2018) claims that 'Robinson became the face of resistance against Islamisation', implying it is the reason 'the Brits took to the streets to protest his arrest.' It is worth noting that counter-narratives are also aimed at the alt-right. In the UK, a counter-narrative to far-right extremism is reclaiming the EDL from the English Defence League, a party lead by Robinson and redefining as English Disco Lovers



Picture 7 Sample of Haidar's tweets defending Robinson. Robinson is the founder of the English Defence League and convicted for hate speech in the UK

While facing radicalisation, a society must define if intolerance should be tolerated (Taleb 2018). However, liberals now are accused of intolerance since they deploy words such as 'we will not tolerate' and 'this is not a debate' to avoid discussions of taboo issues in order to protect vulnerable people from hate speech (Fox 2018). Clair Fox (2018) states that the

so-called progressive liberals are often intolerant, calling for official censure against anyone perceived as uttering non-progressive views. They openly despise everyone from Trump-voting "deplorables" and Brexit-voting "Gammons" (those "others" who dare to vote the wrong way and won't espouse their "tolerant" values) to those in their own ranks who refuse to toe the liberal line.

Ultimately the goal is to protect a group that is victimised in the name of diversity and creating a tolerant environment. However, 'its implementation has been rash and ill-advised because it lumps all potentially victimized groups, including Muslims, into one category' (Rasmi 2018). This tendency in media discourse plays into the extremists' goals by defining Muslims only by their Muslimness and othering them from society. The hashtag #Alt-right-ctr-left-Delete started by Majid Nawaz summaries this drama. People on the right are called Nazi due to their hate speech, like Robinson. Racism of low expectation is attributed to the left of the political spectrum where Muslim men are not held to the same standards of white men (Box of Islam 2019). For example, in the wake of #MeToo movement Tarik Ramadan was accused of rape by two women; before he was convicted, Prof Eugene Rogan claimed Ramadan was being smeared for being a prominent Muslim (Yorke, Lawford 2017). El-Qemani (September 8, 2018), who identifies as a Muslim scholar, claims that he was accused of being fascist for expressing his views.

Political polarisation or ideological differences have grown steadily between left and right to the point that ‘meanings of some words are now polarised’ and ‘viewers from different news channels are, in a way, speaking different languages’ (Spice 2020; Simchon, Brady et. al 2020). The controversy around the term Islamophobia attests to that. EQUINET, the European Network of Equality Bodies, developed a toolkit of counter-narratives to Islamophobia. Ten dominant narratives are listed on the website which are: ‘threat to security, unassimilable, demographic threat and proselytization, theocracy, threat to identity, gender inequality, ontological diversity, innate violence, incomplete citizenship and homophobia’ (Law, Easat-Daas et al. 2018). On the other hand, Nawaz and Abdel-Samad do not deny the anti-Muslim bigotry, preferring the term to Islamophobia since the term is argued to be used by political Islam to silence them. Reflecting on the status of the discourse around Islamism, Rizvi (Box of Islam 2019f) claims that the right is wrong about Muslims and the left is wrong about Islam.

Similarly, media programs addressing these topics are also subjected to huge backlash. For example, a satire show titled *The Wives of ISIS* caused backlash in the UK (Larner 2017). Mixed views are reported, saying the programme was ‘making human suffering light entertainment’ and that it ‘fanned Islamophobia and crossed well past the boundaries of good taste’. This naturally caused a counter-backlash that denounced political correctness and argued that freedom of expression — including pungent satire — is the best line of defence against extremism (Bilefsky 2017). Satire is not unique in soliciting backlash; Channel 4 cancelled *Islam: The Untold Story*, a documentary by Tom Holland, after Ofcom received more than a thousand complaints (O’Carroll 2012; Sweney 2012). The documentary is based on Holland’s academic research questioning if Mohamed had anything to do with the Quran. Polarisation is a hindrance to conducting a constructive debate about Islam, extremism and Muslim integration in the West.

The messenger is central to the different counter-narrative frameworks. However, visibility in the public domain can render them targets of argumentum ad hominem technics of personal attacks or online abuse. It does not necessarily affect their control of the narrative. This overview does not aim to question their ability in such environment. It simply points out the inherent vulnerability of identifying them in the public sphere. Since extremists control the narratives to begin with, an effective smear campaign may affect the public reception of the messenger’s ideas.

### *In the private telegram extremists' channels*

Since extremists' messaging is being disrupted on social media, they relied extensively on Telegram, the messaging app. In this setup, messengers are only facing extremists' counter-narratives. ISIS is believed to have been born out of Al-Qaeda, however Hamming (2019) argues that this notion needs to be discarded since its founder al-Zarqawi, a hardliner, had theological differences with al-Qaeda and their merger was 'due to the strategic gains both groups hoped to benefit from.' Moreover, in May 2014, ISIS spokesperson Abu Mohamed Al-Adnani states, 'the conflict between the Islamic State and al-Qaeda is one of method' (ibid). This difference is highlighted in a communiqué released by ISIS to its supporters on telegram on 14 December 2017. It was shared with me by @Carl (2016), a Kurdish activist who infiltrates Jihadi channels; he is been marked as a target for ISIS hence his identity and the data acquired from him is not divulged by this research. The communiqué may shed some light on the conflict between the two organisations. But most importantly, it addressed spies who infiltrate ISIS communication channels in order to challenge their narratives. Aimed for ISIS supporters, it warns them about spies employed by intelligence agencies. The communiqué divides spies into two categories; the first category's job is to criticise the Caliphate and its media outlet, the second one, mainly 'Zawahiri's orphans' [al-Qaeda], criticises its methods and the third attacks the supporters. The first category was easily dismissed by questioning their motives for inquiring about ISIS as personal and accusing them of creating news channels to 'report on fake battles that were not mentioned by the official ISIS channels [...the argument concludes] anyone who publishes a picture of a mujahid in the Caliphate , accuses him of anything or mocks him is a spy serving crusaders and aims to gain from them.'

Their response suggests that some al-Qaeda personnel questioned the Caliphate 's ruling and jurisprudence, arguing it disagrees with Sheikh Zarqawi or Abu el-Omar el-Baghdadi and criticised the Caliphate 's methods; therefore, the ISIS communiqué accuses them of working with intelligence agencies and criticises their limited animosity with Shia clerics. Al-Qaeda's criticism was easily dismissed: 'By God, this is ignorance. Do we take our religion from men or from the book and Sunna, so we say Allah said and the prophet of Allah said (pbuh)?' The communiqué alluded to 'fake beard'" in Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula before directly threatening to completely crush a certain Abu Lahab as they did to el-Makedessi and Abu Kumama. The last part consists of praise to their

flood of true supporters...the true voice of the Caliphate ... its virtual army  
all over social media, that manages to debunk all accusations from TV

channels and accounts. Supporters kept control over social media and any pig or mercenary for the crusaders has to think 1000 times before writing one sentence to slander the Caliphate and its leaders.

This research cannot confirm if the spies were truly al-Qaeda or messengers infiltrating these channels. The aim is to focus on the talking points in their response. This raises the question if this infiltration played to their strengths rather than damaging their credibility to their supporters. Furthermore, they highlighted their direct reliance on the Quran and Sunnah and not on preachers. These texts are the reference for both extremists and moderates. Further data or advice is needed on averting the risk of radicalisation that messengers can encounter from infiltrating channels or being directed to chat forums to conduct audience research. Tuck & Silverman (2016:9) list Stormfront as a resource to knowing the interests of far-right extremists. Additionally, in the unlikely case this communiqué was triggered by messengers posing as al-Qaeda fighters, extra care needs to be given to curb tendencies of normalising al-Qaeda's or any other moderate Islamist group's modus operandi even if they are less violent than ISIS.

#### Online propagation:

Tuck and Silverman's counter-narratives guidelines advise that the videos need to be short for online campaigns and to have the first seconds of their movies to be as attention grabbing as possible (2016). This section will discuss some problems that may prevent maximum reach under two sections: Online echo chambers and Dark web.

#### *Online echo chambers*

The different frameworks did not advise on increasing online reach. The newer ones stressed the necessity for using multiple platforms (Van Ginkel, 2015) and advised on using an adequate medium to platform (Tuck & Silverman 2016). However, the counter-narratives' videos, reviewed here, will still be available on YouTube and they can still attract viewership. Abdel-Samad (2016) claims that the Internet will be to Islam what print was to Christianity in Europe, in the sense that it will bring enlightenment ideas to be discussed by the general public outside the hold of religious institutions. In practical terms, social media facilitated connecting

discriminated communities like Atheists in the Middle East who are denied space on mainstream media. Ahmad Harkan, a prominent Egyptian Atheist, was forced to leave a TV set with the presenter shouting that Atheists are not welcome. When he was arrested with his wife, the Egyptian police was accused of beating them to the point that his pregnant wife miscarried (Daring Question 2015q; 2015r).

It is worth noting that algorithms can play a positive or a negative role in promoting a message. Without the redirect initiative, web surfers receive content suggestions based on their consumption history; this can be noted on YouTube, social media websites and even media streaming website like Netflix. The maximum reach guaranteed by manipulating algorithms does not guarantee their target at-risk individuals. While the number of views sourced by this research from YouTube is indicative of consumption, it cannot guarantee the videos were viewed in full. Facebook and YouTube count views after a certain number of seconds of the video were played. Securing a loyal audience is very important to create the change of minds believed to be needed for true success. In order to do this, longer campaigns (as in number of outputs) are needed and the output needs to be appealing to new audiences. In its three years on YouTube, Echoes of ISIS gathered 591 views. However, the internet traffic could be directed to the website of the project instead of the YouTube video. The videos on the AFVT channel have fluctuating numbers of views. The playlist with the Arabic subtitles has only 2 videos exceeding 100 views. Videos from *Box of Islam* exceed tens of thousands of views. Even if the reliability of these numbers is questioned, the difference raises the question if there is interest in the topic to begin with.

#### *Dark web:*

The Internet does not cause radicalisation; it offered extremists a tool to reach those who can be radicalised and invite them into the dark web to complete the process (Van Ginkel 2015). With the successful campaign to take down the extremist propaganda from the web, they had migrated further to the dark web. Telegram became a favourite app. Accessing extremist propaganda requires action from the recipients (Macdonal et. al 2016 cited Hemmingsen, Castro 2017: 25). This personal effort to retrieve their propaganda can add an appeal to their pull technique (ibid) and questions if counter-messaging can carry the same appeal. To infiltrate the dark web, the messenger needs to be technically savvy and have a very reliable Internet security as well as a deep knowledge of Islam or jihadi cells structure. This structure according to Nesser

(2015 cited Hemmingsen, Castro 2017: 20) has four distinct types: entrepreneurs, protégés, misfits and drifters. Each type may require a different approach to de-radicalise or deter. It is unclear if different factions need different approaches or how will they interact with the counter-message as the data still lacking.

Finally

Since counter-narratives are failing to fulfil their purpose and may be pushing their target audience towards ISIS (Glazzard 2017; Nafees 2018; Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020) a different approach is needed. Nafees (2018) recounts social anchors that prevented recruitment of some youth compared to others. They were 'members of action-oriented groups that provided... [them] with values, an identity, and a sense of brother or sisterhood' or they possessed a political aim like 'fighting against discrimination or helping refugees. Other times they were part of local youth centres that actively fostered local identity building and social activism.' If this engagement, local identity and attachment to environment and community prevent radicalisation then counter-narratives needs to nurture it by promoting a multiplicity in identity construct. Extremists' narratives dissociate the personal identity construct from land and culture and asserts Islam as the single source of identity (Abdel-Samad 2016; el-Qemani September 8, 2018).

After pinpointing that counter-narratives are counterproductive, Bélanger et. al (2020) suggest that campaigns are more successful when addressing political topics. Certainly, this should be taken into consideration and practices can test this direction. However, it worth noting that political campaigns particularly on social media do not swing opinions (Stein 2020). In the common practice, these campaigns aim to promote a politician and most importantly they are meant to push people to action as increase turnout of supporters.

Since a change of minds and hearts is needed, another approach is needed. Glazzard (2017) stresses the importance of the inspiration caused by the creative writing or storytelling of radical authors like bin Laden, or Sayid Qutb who was a novelist before creating the Muslim Brotherhood. This inspiration needs to be countered by similar inspiration; in practical terms he is suggesting relying on cultural products to counter Islamists' narratives. Since Ferguson (2016) cemented the necessity to produce identity-related content on mainstream media, we will move to discuss the themes needed and most importantly the quest to identify a positive representation.

#### 4.0 New studies: the practice inquiry

My practice inquiry looked closely at representation. The quest was to identify how the language and the thematic content needs to be articulated to the wide audience. The textual review identified the themes. Representation of these themes was subjected to an in-depth analysis in order to recognise stereotypical representations and understand where the change is needed. Hall (1980:131) suggests that ‘discursive “knowledge” is the product not of the transparent representation of the “real” in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions.’ Conducting a practice inquiry and reflecting on the process was necessary in order to build the framework. This adhered to the skin-in-the-game principles espoused in the methodology as well as the process where the ‘practice nearly always comes first, and it is only later people theorize about practice’ (Pears 1971: 29 cited Nelson 2006 :105)

The practice inquiry resulted in the creation of seven video-essays: *Nahed Hattar*, *FGM*, *Islamists’ Representation*, *Hijra and Jihad*, *Dance*, *Women in Arabia* and *Coptic Representation*. They are discussed under two headings: media discourse and representation studies. In the media discourse section, mixed media texts are the primary source of data. Each video-essay has its own impact on the framework, *Nahed Hattar* established the need for addressing a general audience and the human-centric approach to the products of this framework was theorised as a result of the *FGM* video.

In the representation studies section, films were the main source of data. The five remaining vide-essays are titled: *Islamists’ Representation*, *Hijra and Jihad*, *Women in Arabia* and *Coptic Representation*. The study conducted in these video-essays identified problems in the current representation such as casting Islamists as an ‘other’ instead of dealing with them as a problem within. Furthermore, the practice attempted when possible to conduct a stylistic inquiry into the creative expression [*Women in Arabia*] to embed the theory deployed in its practice.



## Media discourse

In this section, I discuss the two video-essays looking at the media discourse. They are titled *Nahed Hattar* and *FGM*

Nahed Hattar 3'23" Vignette <https://youtu.be/kzriXlc8eFk>

*Impact on framework: This video imposed the need to address a general public and challenge extremism in the cultural sphere*

This video features clips from TV shows, news websites and social media entries. It explored reporting on the violence exerted on a public figure and how it was received. Although this was the first video started in this project, it was revisited more than 12 times to its current edit. With the minority angle emerging from the literature review, Nahed Hattar drew my interest as a potential skin-in-the-game scholar. He is a Jordanian journalist, expert on Salafism and a Christian born to a native Jordanian tribe. His stance was nuanced. He wrote in a newspaper close to Hezbollah and supported their politics yet has little tolerance for the Muslim Brotherhood; even his apology tweet quoted in the video equated them with ISIS (ikhwanje-Da3esh). Since I was planning to interview him on the political alignments on minorities, the discussion would have probed if his political alignment is stemming from the absence of Hezbollah influence in Jordan or shaped by his personal or national experiences with the Israel/Palestinian conflict. It is worth noting that this research project started after Hezbollah published footage confirming their involvement in the Syrian war in 2014 after denying it for several months (Future TV News 13 September 2014). Before the Israeli army withdrew from Lebanon, Hezbollah anchored their image as resistance to an occupying army targeting their troops. This perception was challenged once their involvement in Syria became public.

Hattar shared a Cartoon that mocks the depiction of heaven in extremists' texts. This triggered a court case against him for insulting Islam. He was assassinated on the steps of the court house. This tragic event shifted the focus of this video from the interview's plan probing minorities' selective tolerance of political Islamist parties to their great influence in setting the tone in the cultural discourse. The presenter who condoned the assassination was an example of the wide tolerance and even justification of the violent act. While the tweets shared on Daring Question reflected the public acceptance of his murder, they were anonymous, and it was not possible to

verify their methodology in sourcing and assessing anonymous online comments. I should add that living in the UK at the time did not warrant first hand access to local media outlets to observe the day to day reactions and evolution of the discourse.

The prosecution and execution of the assassin exemplifies Tiflati's suggestion (Box of Islam 2019g) where laws offer a framework for punishing behavioural extremism, since killing or joining a jihadi group are illegal but cognitive extremism is spared since thoughts are not illegal. Therefore, it is acceptable to express support for a murder based on scriptures even on national TV. The reflection on final edits defined a target audience of this approach as a wider audience than just those vulnerable with radicalisation. Hence this became an inquiry to theorise how to address cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere in a way that helps eradicate Islamic behavioural extremism or militant Jihadi groups.

FGM : 9' 26" Vignette <https://youtu.be/shlraY2aUSY>

*Impact on framework: The necessity of a human-centric approach; and the importance of foreign funds in addressing certain issues*

This video features clips from TV outlets, media clips discussing female genital mutilation (FGM), news websites, social media entries and the movie *Dunia* (Saab 2005). The film is included since it was set in Egypt and is one of the rare movies that treats the topic; it was made possible by French funds and coproduction. The Egyptian government control the movie productions, and movies addressing the issues are very scarce. This highlights the importance of foreign funds in addressing subjects avoided by the national cinema. It also raises the question of how much cultural impact can these funds have if they considered the national audience of the foreign films, they are financing.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) poses a serious danger to the sexual health of young girls. The National health Services (NHS 2017) clitoridectomy suggests there are four types of girls' circumcision: Type 1 removes part or all of the clitoris; Excision (Type 2) removes part or all of the clitoris and inner labia with or without removal of the labia majora; and infibulation (Type 3) narrows the vaginal opening by creating a seal formed by cutting and repositioning the labia.

The NHS defines (Type 4) as 'any harmful procedures to the female genitals including pricking, piercing, cutting, scraping or burning the area' (NHS 2017)

Since its early days, this research paid close attention to the role of women's narratives in countering extremism. This role is recognised in Van Ginkel's (2015) framework pointing out to the important roles of mothers in this fight. Early edits were looking at FGM from the angle of representation of women and contextualised in feminist theories, particularly Islamic feminism. This had to be reflected on the editing of this video-essay. On 12 June 2017, FGM trended on Twitter due to the news of arrest and trial of the American doctors mentioned in the video. American-Egyptian journalist Mona ElTahawi was at its centre of the Twitter storm, attempting to stand up for Muslim women and calling for eradication of the practice without mincing words. She was also attempting to counter a narrative that limits FGM practice and blames it on Islam. It is worth noting that FGM is not an exclusively Muslim problem. The video opens with a report from the Guardian featuring white Christian American women who were circumcised and a tweet highlighting FGM is spread in the Coptic community.

The video juxtaposes discourse from Western and Egyptian media to highlight the difference in their approaches. It is not surprising that conservative FOX News anchor Tucker Carlson would present FGM as a Muslim problem, or an unwanted cultural import saying, 'I don't want that in my culture.' However, it was indeed part of Carlson's culture as shown in the report from the Guardian who gave the victim, the White American, the space to voice her experience. Despite the plethora of studies on FGM victims in Western academic institutions, there were no attempts in that show to relate their voices. Carlson's guest's technique in defending the practice aimed to minimise negative perception by replacing the term mutilation with cutting. However, claiming that circumcising girls is an embodiment of an egalitarian culture brings to mind el-Tahawi's (2016) comment that feminist tools are being used against women rights and wellbeing. This puts to question the ability for a feminist angle to make a difference in the discourse. To be clear the issue here is that there is a harmful procedure conducted on young girls without their consent. It is expected from feminist discourse to prioritise women's health over cultural sensitivity. The choice should be respected if the adult woman took a conscious decision regarding her own body and the procedure was administered safely in a medical facility, like the guest.

This video-essay showed how the Muslim community are denied mobility as in the right to express opinions that are different from popular perception. Linda Sarsour's tweet calling FGM barbaric was met with a lesson on Hadith, and her adherence and knowledge of Muslim teachings were put to question. Moderation per Harris' (2004 :17 cited in Schmid 2014b: 8) definition is the ability to loosely interpret texts. Muslims, or even Islamists, should be able to express free opinions without being trapped by a predefined interpretation of what Islam is or shamed by their preachers for wanting an immediate change to culture or tradition, like Ramadan attempted gently to do.

One of advantages of using video-essays in this research, is the multiple levels of communication that allow the audience to pick instantly on subtle differences that otherwise would be missed in a written description. For example, a woman that presents herself in an ultra-conservative costume (a complete body veil with gloves as if she considers her hands to be Awra), i.e. Zahra the Egyptian Muslim scholar, spoke with passion and called FGM an institutionalised crime. Conversely, the modern looking American scholar used feminist values of equality to reserve the right to circumcise girls and boys. Nawal el-Saadawi argues that circumcision should be equally abolished for both genders. Furthermore, the ability to watch the outlandish conspiracy theories first hand and recognise the broadcaster may render dismissing the claim as Islamophobia more difficult. The baseless conspiracy theory claims that the Jews want to eradicate FGM to corrupt Muslims communities. The Jewish community feature in the heart of most conspiracies including 9/11 where 5000 Jews were supposedly alerted by the Mossad to skip work on that day. This news featured in Teshrine, a Syrian newspaper. This video is sourced from MEMRI. The organisation scouts Arabic speaking media for controversial videos and translates them for a western audience. They have a project dedicated to the Jews. The effectiveness of MEMRI's method is for debate, but in all fairness, it facilitates the task of sourcing controversial media clips.

More importantly, this is an opportunity to address the reliance on conspiracy theory in Islamist discourse. Usually the narrative of conspiracy theory is built around a small group of people who want to subdue or exterminate a larger group (Priority of Zion, Feminist plan to eradicate family) or even want world domination (illuminati, New World Order) (Bert 2015). Abdel-Samad (2016) points out the overwhelming belief in conspiracy theory in Islamic circles and the Middle East in general. As seen in its usage in the video-essay, a conspiracy theory can successfully dismiss engaging with criticism and consequently delay dealing with problems. Considering the wide consumption of conspiracy theories in these circles (Samrani 2014, Bert 2015, el-Saad 2015, Daring Question 2014ag), counter and alternative narratives alike need to avoid empowering these dangerous discourses. The Jewish community has paid a heavy price for this tendency. They were purged out of their home countries in Iraq, Morocco and Egypt as a response to the creation of Israel (Abdel-Samad 2016).



*Picture 8 From the show Dawlat el-Kharafa, in reference to IS. The show features the wedding of Satan to a Jewish Bride giving birth to ISIS*

Conspiracy theory features as one of the reasons in a Vox pop segment of a TV episode asking about the causes of terrorism. This was aired on 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2017, by the television station ON. Some answers pointed out to an education crisis. But mostly, they attributed terrorism to indoctrination by a foreign ideology (referring to Saudi Wahabism) and felt that terrorists are hired by Israel and America to wreak havoc in Muslim countries (Kol Yom 2017a). The guest, El-Behiri, had to debunk these misconceptions and pointed to the Islamic tradition books, the Hadith, taught in el-Azhar and by extension in most schools in the Muslim majority countries, as the basis of this behaviour.

Comedy is considered a successful approach in tackling extremist issues as per the advice given to counter-narratives' practitioners. The show titled *Dawlat el-Kharafa* (State of Superstition) aired on al Iraqiya, a mainstream TV channel in Iraq. It took a similar angle to the Hungarian Facebook page that ridiculed ISIS. Its opening credits features the devil's wedding to a Jewish woman – she was wearing the star of David [top picture] – and they gave birth to Daesh (ISIS). On the right, the picture depicts the wedding's guests: Dracula, the Joker, a cowboy who is a friend to the devil and a woman



*Picture 9 From the show Dawlat el-Kharafa featuring the wedding Guests: A cowboy, the joker and a woman modelled after Sheikhha Moza*

whose dress code brings to mind Sheikha Moza, the Qatari former princess as a friend to Satan's wife. Hiding behind conspiracy theories hinders addressing some Islamic texts that absolve if not promote extremism (Kol Yom 2017a). Conspiracy theories empower the binary of victimhood/supremacy that is inherent in fascist theory and in Islam according to Abdel-Samad (2016) and they negatively affect the lives of Muslims according to Wafa Sulta (Daring Question 2016aa).

As Linda Sarsour correctly pointed out, the Quran does not mention FGM, and its preservation is founded on Hadith. While it is acknowledged that FGM predates Islam – excision (Type 2) is called the Pharaonic circumcision – the counter-argument anchors the necessity to preserve the tradition but to regulate the practice. Most importantly, when the victims of FGM are mentioned in the debate between the two sheikhs, there was a change of tone from the defender of the practice. While he still upheld the preservation of tradition stance, he acknowledges that there are problems that can be addressed by regulation.

This video-essay brought forward the necessity for a human-focused approach. This hopes to redefine the focus of the debate from general ideas into making the lived experience better.

#### Representation studies

This section focuses on the video-essays conducting representation studies in Egyptian films. This section discusses *Islamists' Representation* in Egyptian cinema. Under the heading Thematic representation, I discuss the representation of the three themes. *Hijra and Jihad* corresponds to historical narratives. Two videos are discussed under women's status: *Dance* and *Women in Arabia*. Finally, the video-essay in the theme of minorities' rights is titled *Coptic Representation*

Islamist representation 9'16" Film Analysis <https://drive.google.com/open?id=1-qZBRfjZny69RRct8QQ-KGTAdZOD7mIQ>

*Impact on framework: avoid the othering in representing Islamists; avoid the just a movie reception or an unrealistic setup to deliver messages in the form of monologue*

The films featured in the essay are: *Al-Irhab wal-Kabab* (Arafa 1992), *Al-Massir* (Chahine 2000),

*Touyour el-Zalam* (Arafa 1995) and *Hello America* (Galal, Abu Zekri 2000). Their inclusion is due to their representation of extremists in their narrative.

The major threat of Islamism according to Antonius (Box of Islam 2019f) is the success of changing the nature of social relationships. This is a goal arguably already achieved in Egypt. Politically, the Sadat era is linked to the rise of fundamentalism in Egypt; however, Ramadan (Daring Question 2012d) argues that it was Abdel-Nasser that made Al-Azhar a partner in the judiciary process, paving the way to the current status quo. Mubarak's era inherited all this and 'attempted to restore control of the cultural sphere, as a way of countering the rising Islamist wave and recapturing a modern secular image' (Mehrez 2012:144).

Given its long struggle with extremism, it was essential to understand how extremists were represented in Egyptian cinema. Khatib (2006a; 2006b:64) argues that the West represents Muslim/Arab as 'other' and so does Egyptian cinema to fundamentalists. This mythical other is viewed as an enemy in a battle of us v. them, hence it was never looked at as a 'problem within' (ibid). She claims that this representation follows the classical view that it tells more about us than it does them (Khatib 2006b:66).

Egypt's identity is constructed on combining Asian with African, Muslim with Pharaonic and Arab by different proportions (Abdallah 2000 cited Khatib 2006b: 67). 'The world of fundamentalism is a world of deceit and contradiction', and even if it may be based on Egypt's experience it casts them as 'an extreme other' while asserting a national identity of a homogenous anti-fundamentalist monolith (Khatib 2006b: 72). However, in this monolith, the Copts are also the other (Mezher 2012). Khatib (2006b:68) claims these films prefer 'selective integration' with Copts celebrated as nationalists in contrast to the intolerance of the extremists.

Egypt identifies as a mother (Khatib 2006a). These movies use women as symbols of nation, hence the normal Egyptian woman can pursue any moral career while a fundamentalist one is confined to executing orders from her male superior (in *Al-Irhabi*, the sheikh eats with his four wives and communicates with them using gestures and shouting) (Khatib 2006b).

Contrasting the dramatization of fundamentalists with images from the mainstream media, sometimes dedicated religious channels, reflected that the culture of othering extremists is somewhat a misrepresentation of this society. This is where the choice of video-essays comes in handy over written texts due to its multilevel communication.

Abdel-Samad (2016) compares political Islam and the Nazi party. He claims that supremacy is an intrinsic shared value between Islam and fascism (2016; Box of Islam 2016aa; 2016 b; 2016c; 2016d). He demonstrated el-Banna's (founder of the Brotherhood) fascination and tight link with fascism. El-Banna regarded Mussolini's idea of an army state to go hand in hand with the teachings of Mohamed but Mussolini's earthly goals did not reach the divine goals of Islam (Ibid). Hitler's Mein Kampf is adapted as the Islamic Jihad, the swastika became the double swords of the Brotherhood; furthermore, the highest-ranking Brother is called el-Morshid (guide) a direct translation from Führer, the title was adopted by Khomeini in Iran who was influenced by the Brothers and co-wrote a book with el-Banna and Mawdoudi (Ibid). Nazi propaganda demonised the Jews; this earned them collaboration from El Hussein, Imam of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, who helped diffuse Nazi propaganda via the Berlin based Arabic speaking Radio throughout the Middle East (Ibid).



*Picture 9 The logo of Muslim Brotherhood retrieved from their Arabic website. It features the Quran highlighted by 2 swords and the word wa-a'idu in reference to a Quranic verse (8:60) ordering to be ready to battle God's enemy*

Most importantly, he argues that Germany was reborn by owning up to an ideology that is no longer acceptable and rising above its past, while the Muslim world still holds dear to a worldview that cannot be compatible with the modern world. The othering of the Islamists in the representation and the reliance on conspiracy theories exemplify this unwillingness to address extremism as a problem within, ideologically and culturally.

*Al-Irhabi* features an assassination that brings to mind the assassination of the writer Faraje following a fatwa from the IG. The Azhari scholar who defended the murder was a Muslim Brother (Ahmed 2011); this is why discussing the Brotherhood is relevant here. The parallel drawn to Germany is important. This study will rely on Mann's (2003) article What is wrong with Nazi movies? to understand and avoid repeating the same mistakes in its recommendations for future representations. Mann warns against movies that can be easily dismissed as 'just movies'. These movies can be dismissed by an audience that is used to Hollywood's exaggeration; hence



they dismiss the cinematic experience easily (ibid). In this context, the caricature of othering Islamists and the delivery of message fuelled monologues in extreme setups can cause the dismissal of the movie. The matriarch of the family hosting the terrorist challenges his extremists' views when he is holding her family at gun point and the Egyptian SWAT teams are closing in on her house. Many mothers might have to have this conversation with their radicalised children, possibly using the exact words. However, the emotional impact is not fully sensed since the family member was set as an outsider since the beginning. So, while they mourned him, the impact on their lives is not as devastating as if he was one of their own. *Al-Irhabi's* premise diminished the loss of the terrorist. *Al-Massir* used the personal tragedy as a wakeup call to break with the extremist group. However, in a space of seconds, it showed the emotional struggle his adopted mother went through to accept his return.

Going forward, it is important to note that Islamist discourse is shifting (Box of Islam 2019e). How Islamists are presenting themselves is different, and instead of the visual identifier of beards and the white thobes, nowadays the discourse can be presented in a hipster modern look (Azzi, Tannous 2021).

#### Thematic representation

The textual review identified three themes recurrent in anti-extremist discourse. In this section, I discuss the study of their representation in Egyptian films.

##### 1- Historical narrative:

Hijra and Jihad" 8' vignette <https://youtu.be/EiZBo0dy-mM>

*Impact on framework: the necessity to debunk myth concerning the birth of Islam in the narrative of 'establishment Islam'*

The films included in this video essay are: *El-Shayma'* (Mustafa 1972), *Hijrat al-Rassoul* (Amara 1964) and *Al-Rissala* (Akkad 1976). Their selection is due to their role in shaping the perception of early Islam in the public's psyche.

This video-essay is conceived in relation to el-Baghdadi's speech dated 4 Meharram 1439 or 24 September 2017. @Carl (2016) shared a transcription with me circulated on Telegram hours

after the speech's release. The essay aims to understand the representation of Hijra and jihad in early Islam as well as the polytheist in Jahilia [age of ignorance, usually means pre-Islamic Arabia].

The structure of the speech is carefully designed to tackle different concepts. It starts by praying on dead Muslims, then moves to discuss heaven claiming that Satan attempts to derail humans from embracing Islam and stops them from Hijra and Jihad. Al-Baghdadi dissociates the concept of winning and losing from retaining land. He blames Muslims' historical loss of power for the attacks from apostate states 'till the religion is lost', praising el-Zarqawi for his jihad against the nation of the cross. He considered the ordeal to be a blessing, since it was followed by a victory and a Fatah where they [ISIS] erased the borders between Iraq and Syria. They 'akaro el-Din' [imposed Islam], therefore, the apostate states got angry and they had to put aside their differences to battle the Islamic state with little success. This is because America [colloquial for the US] who depicted itself as a superpower is now crumbling and Russia is taking advantage of this weakness. Russia is now responsible for Syria, after it emptied it from its people. Syrian Sunnis accepted the rule of the Noussayriah [derogative for Alawi]. Baghdadi also commented on Turkey's fear of an independent Kurdish state and on the Arabian Gulf countries' fear of Iran. El-Baghdadi still hopes to fight, praying for a victory like Bader [A war between Mohamed and the Meccans], since victory is unrelated to numbers as per Khandak [Another war]. Islam's sons in the Caliphate proved that they are the nation's shield despite the crusaders' use of illegal weapons. Talking about dignity, el-Baghdadi claims it can only be reclaimed by fighting and calling on the Sunni in Iraq and el-Sham [Colloquial for Damascus or Syria] to revolt against humiliation, reminding them that the Prophet's companions did not back out because of wounds and death. Stating the common belief 'el-Islam ya3lo wala ya3lo 3alayh' meaning that Islam is supreme, he stresses that a martyr is bestowed with six characteristics: he is given a seat in heaven, spared from the torture of the grave, spared from the 'big fear', crowned with respect, married to 72 of the hour-el-ein (heavenly virgins) and can intercede on behalf of his loved ones. In the end, el-Baghdadi used a Prophet quotation to assert that America cannot win against them.

This speech showcases awareness of global political circumstances. It also portrays how important and present is heaven's hypothesis in the militant's psyche (Hamid 2016). El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) attributes this to the non-guaranteed redemption in the Sunni jurisprudence except in the case of Shahada (martyrdom). Most importantly it shows the longing

for a connection with the Prophet in its attempts to identify with early Muslims fighting polytheists to establish the confederate state of Islam, as el-Qemani calls it (ibid).

Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2017b) states that the perception of early Islam in the public's psyche is shaped by these movies more than the actual historical texts. Referring to *El-Shayma'*, Abdel-Samad argues that the movie is based on a Sufi conceptualisation of an idealised version of the Prophet that is divorced from historical accounts. Hijra is portrayed in these movies in a way that brings to mind images of Palm Sunday; even the song Tala' el-Bader Alayna, according to Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2017ad) is an old Syriac hymn that celebrates Easter. From that perspective, he argues that the era should be looked upon from a cultural exchange perspective and understood as the mutual influences of different civilisations.

*El-Shayma'* does not shy away from stating that Mohamed initiated the feud with the polytheists, attributing that to a divine order. The Jews are represented as backstabbers who are lying since their books should reflect that Mohamed is the prophet awaited in Arabia.

The movies misrepresent the polytheists of Arabia. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) claims that in the time of Mohamed, women dresses would be sewn from the sides making cuts to accommodate the arms and the head. However, the movies showcase their fashion as if it was an Orientalist depiction of a harem in the Abbasside or the Ottoman era. Polytheists are portrayed as cruel, torturing their converted slaves with a bloodlust that is difficult to quench. The belly dancers signal the immorality and promiscuity of the polytheists, in contrast of the moral Muslim community where women are fully covered. El-Qemani (ibid) claims that Islamists' morality is centred around women dress and sexuality.

The images collected in the video-essay are in stark contrast from the images imagined from the textual review shows and lectures. Polytheists are argued to be an open society with multiple Kaabas, that welcome all form of faiths and even had icons of Jesus and the Virgin Mary (Daring Question 2007e; 2007i; Box of Islam 2017o). El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) argues that this inclusive feature was not an attribute to polytheism but a necessity for a town that needed to host traveling merchants from different backgrounds and faiths. The freeing of slaves is one of the big myths advanced in these movies, particularly Hijrat el-Rassoul, since there are 72 *Ayas* that regulate slavery in the Quran and deprive the slave who runs away from the master from heaven (el-Qemani September 8, 2018; Box of Islam 2018a). Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2019a) cites that 2 million African slaves were killed as the result of their revolt against their condition in the Abbasside empire.

It is difficult to say if this representation is motivated by an ideological reasoning. However, it certainly influenced how the audience of these movies imagined old Arabia. Needless to say, the study of representation from a practice-led perspective is perceived as a way to inform future practices stemming from this research. This video-essay showcases that debunking the misinformation about polytheists in Arabia is a necessity since polytheism in general is depicted as immoral in popular culture, and this plays directly to the extremists' narrative. On a more positive note, there is room for artistic exploration to factually represent early Arabia and correct the misperception in the public's psyche.

## 2- Women's status

Dance: 8'6" Film analysis <https://youtu.be/QvIYP4rUSSA>

*Impact on framework: the role of French funds in artistic discourse; the story is the message; representation of Muslims in the West,*

The films featured in this video essay are: *Singing in the Rain* (Gene, Donan 1952), *Imara'a Wahida la Takfi* (Digheidi 1990) *Dunia* (Saab 2005) *Sabah* (Nadda 2005) *Whatever Lola Wants* (Ayouch 2008). These films were selected from different countries in order to note the difference in their treatment of the women body.

This video put the female body central to its representation. This 'female body' constructs and "maintains a hierarchy along the lines of a sexual difference assumed as natural" (Doane 2000:87). In certain setups, the belly dance performed by the female body monopolises the gaze of a male character. Belly dance is largely viewed as a feminine art form, with some few exceptions of male dancers.

Each film has relied on this art form and the body performing it to communicate different signals. When representing the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the female body, and precisely the belly dancer is used to signal the immorality of the polytheists in Mecca. However, more contemporary films represent belly dance as a way of liberation in *Dunia* and communication or a cultural bridge in *Whatever Lola Wants*. It is worth noting that *Dunia* and *Whatever Lola Wants* are movies funded by Les Fonds Sud and are directed respectively by French directors from Lebanese and Moroccan

backgrounds. Les Fonds Sud, as an initiative that funds Francophone movies worldwide, is specific to France (Khatib 2008). Certainly, these funds are subjected to their own selection politics (Sojcher 2011). However, they present dance as assuming control of their character's lives and body in contrast of the Egyptian film where the belly dancer could not refuse the sexual advances of the male onlooker.

While the video aimed to look at the female body, *Sabah* gave an insight on representing Muslims in the West. *Sabah* is a veiled Syrian migrant in Canada. She fell in love and finally stood up to her brother claiming her voice and space in the family and society at large. Maintaining the realism of the situation, the focus of the feud with her brother on family matters without breaking into grandstanding monologues and more importantly the positive light of how it was resolved are considerations to keep in mind for future representations. Simply put, the movie tells a story of integration of a family that successfully preserved some aspect of their cultural singularity. Muslim representation in the Wests need to take into account the far-right as well as Islamist discourse, however they both subscribe to the single identity construct. Recognising and representing the cultural singularity of the different migrant Muslim communities can challenge this mono-construct.

Normalising representations of dance, the female body and sexuality is important in order to challenge the worldview of Islamism. In their manifesto to stand in the Egyptian election, the Muslim Brotherhood called their national cinema immoral and plan to reform it in the model of Iranian cinema where there is no dancing and women are represented in accordance to Islamic dress code (Daring Question 2011; 2011i; 2013w). El-Tahawi (Daring Question 2013w) claims that cinema was an easier target than literature since Iranian cinema provided a model for them to follow. Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2018) argues that Islam, like any other religion, clashed with modernity. Islamism aims to control every aspect of the daily life, and women's bodies are central to that control (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). He argues that Islamists posits morality as women-centric, focusing on her sexuality and dress code (ibid). The veil and FGM are central to this morality debate. Abdel-Samad (2016) argues that Islamism tries to control every aspect of human life and most of the oppression will fall on women as they are requested to eclipse from the public space unless that public space is branded by their symbol: the veil.

Women in Arabia: 7'56" Vignette [https://youtu.be/R1\\_5L-4B5ns](https://youtu.be/R1_5L-4B5ns)

*Impact on framework: the contrast between the different stylistic expressions of counter-narrative and alternative-narrative*

The films included in this video essay are: *El-Shayma'* (Mustafa 1972), *Hijrat al-Rassoul* (Amara 1964) and *Al-Rissala* (Akkad 1976). Their selection is due to their role in shaping the perception of early Islam in the public's psyche.

Regardless where one might stand on women's role in the Islamist narrative, as preventing mother (Van Ginkel's 2015) or celebrating the martyrdom of their sons (Sultan 2016; Daring Question 2008s), developing human rights in general and women rights in particular are important in countering extremism (Schmidt 2014). It is already established that Islamism is particularly concerned with women's bodies. Given the parallel between Islamism and Nazism (Abdel-Samad 2016) mentioned earlier, Mann's (2003) *What's wrong with Anti-Nazi films?* Is relevant to avoid an audience dismissing the cultural productions.

Classed as a vignette, this video-essay has two components: first, a 7-minute analysis of women's representation in films and second, a video-art exploring an abstraction of reconstructing the missing images of women in Islam. This process reflects the position of this research where researching representation studies has an impact the practitioner's own practice. In a way the contrast between the two parts aims to suggest the contrast in language between the counter and alternative narrative. The counter-narrative is given in an analytical academic voice raising and analysing the question. The alternative narrative is more subtle and aims to engage emotionally.

The video-art complies with the following constraints: no budget, filmed on a mobile phone, lighting relied on a free app from a different mobile phone and a free editing software. These limitations were devised to prove that this form of abstract creative output can be a tool for student and youth expression without it being limited to film schools. Tiflati (Box of Islam 2019g)

states that ISIS is a youth organisation with most of its fighters' age range between 17 and 30. It is no surprise that most counter-narrative initiatives target youth. It is important to include youth's art expression in cultural initiatives, hence since these constraints aimed to adopt the production structure accessible to them without any special measure. Encouraging students to get involved in cultural productions is an added layer to the role academia can play in countering extremism discussed later. Admittedly, this couple of minutes were the most enjoyable in the making. The complete freedom of juxtaposing images and sounds despite the severe constraints changed the relationship with the practice as well as the framework. Most importantly, this research raised the point of security concerns being responsible for excluding people from different backgrounds. Similarly, Nabil Asmar (2021) stressed the difficulty to break into the media industry. His suggestion to counter this difficulty was to run an open call creative competition. This little experiment shows that ideas can be communicated in extreme constraints without any funding support, however, the quality of the product may not be optimum which may be a hindrance to consumption.

The first part of the essay raised the question: Are women the missing image of Islam? Missing image, as defined by Daney, is central to my practice enquiry, as in its philosophical conceptualisation. He calls

image what still relies upon an experience of vision, and "visual" the optical verification of a procedure of power, whatever this may be (technological, political, advertising, military), a procedure which only requires, as sole commentary, a "receiving loud and clear" (Daney 1999)

The missing image is the image that we did not see. Daney gives examples of images from Iraq during the war since Saddam was opposed to sending in journalists and the image of the Palestinian village covered under an Israeli colony (ibid). The media 'headed by TV' forbids us to think there is a missing image, so the space is left empty. However, to love cinema is 'to know what to do with images that are missing' (ibid). This translates herein as advocating the reconstruction of missing images hidden in or by the mainstream narrative. Most importantly, the focus was on specific personalities that can be tracked in the texts. This human-centric approach can create the framework to challenge the misinformation without inciting sensitivities.

The abstraction aimed to adapt Man's idea of poetic validity. Man's (2003:181) argues that realism does not 'unmask the insanity of Hitler's world conquering dream' nor does it 'leave an impression'. However, in *The Dictator*, Charlie Chaplin dances with a balloon; this 'dance is unlikely, but it possesses what we may call a poetic validity.' Visibility and its difference between young girls and women are the main topic, with the voice of el-Qardawi explaining the veil in Islamic tradition overtaking and silencing the poetry of Hind bint Otba. This espouses the angle of Islamic feminists that Islam was created by men and that women did not have a say in the process.

Finally, the video presents a message that can be sensed by the viewer. In this case, the message may be abstract and does not claim to make a sophisticated argument however it proves the possibility of delivering a message indirectly without the need of a talking head. This process embodies the skin-in-the-game concept adopted in the methodology, meaning the practice delivered what the framework is asking the cultural practitioners to do. It can be argued that creative freedom adds a product dimension to academic video-essays, rendering them more accessible to a wider audience. However, this video-essay did not set to prove this argument precisely because of the severe constraints. Reception studies need to be conducted to explore the appeal of academic video-essays to a wider audience and how language and production values can impact their reception.

### 3- Minorities' rights:

Coptic representation: 8'30" film analysis <https://youtu.be/O5YpR-VTlCg>

*Impact on framework: making diversity central to representation; addressing the victimhood narrative by producing content that celebrates minorities' contribution to the national narrative and acknowledges the atrocities they were subjected to*

The films featured are: *Al-Irhabi* (Galal 1994), *Amir el-Zalam* (Imam 2002), *Janat el-Chayatin* (Fawzi 2000), and *Bahib Issima* (Fawzi 2004). These films were selected due to their representation of the Copts.



Content representing minorities is extremely rare on mainstream Middle Eastern broadcasters (Asmar 2021). When they are represented there is a stereotypical image that is recurrent (Mehrez 2012; Azzi, Tannous 2021). This video-essay attempted to explore the representation from the position of a disgruntled Coptic migrant. It is worth noting that there are grounds to challenge the angle presented by the video. However, this is an inquiry into what content can change a discourse, hence it is deemed more important at this stage to understand the undertone of that discourse than to challenge misconceptions when found.

The Copts are the Christian community in Egypt, with around 18 million people (Daring Question 2017a). They have an Orthodox majority with only 3% of Copts being Catholics and Protestant (Boles 2017). The Coptic Orthodox Church considers itself a founding Church, having led the debate in Nicaea when the Roman emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as a religion of the Roman Empire (Daring Question 2017a). Like many other Christian minorities, they do not identify as Arabs but rather to be indigenous to Egypt with a language unrelated to Arabic (ibid). Some believe they are the descendants of the Pharaohs (Boles 2018; Boules 2016).

The Coptic community is a recurrent target for Islamists (Reuters 2018, Guerin 2017; BBC 2018; Box of Islam 2017c). For groups such as ISIS 'attacking Christians is a religious imperative'; in the double attacks in 2017 ISIS has 'successfully morphed its insurgency against the security forces into a campaign against the Christians' (Lynfield 2017). However, it is worth noting that Christians are not the only community targeted by Islamists.

Despite being viewed as pro-Western due to their elite education, Copts were among the founders of the Wafd party – the nationalist party against British colonisation – led by Saad Zaghloul party (Mehrez 2012). In his government Zaghloul appointed Copts in key positions however there was a degradation of their status (Tzoreff March 31, 2019). It is true that the government continues appointing one or two Copts

to ministerial and parliamentary positions, and by seeking the official representation of the Coptic Orthodox Church as part of a national/nationalist and secular public discourse... [but it actively sought to] underrepresent if not misrepresent the Copts in its public sphere [whether it is] educational curricula, or the cultural field in general leading to grave misconceptions within the majority Muslim community in its relationship with the Coptic one (Mehrez 2012:146).

The Sadat era witnessed the 'rise of Islamic extremism [in Egypt] and Coptic fundamentalism as a consequence' (ibid) which lead to the bloody clashes in the 80s and 90s between Muslims and Copts. This anti-Coptic violence is born out of the 'intersection of religious discourse and authoritarian control' (Brownlee 2013: 4). The recurrent official nationalist banner 'Yahya l-hilal ma'a l-salib' (Long live the crescent alongside the cross) repeated at every national/religious crisis aims to 'conceal a history of discrimination and marginalization, if not alienation of the Coptic community' (Mehrez 2012: 146-147). Brownlee (2013:3) argues that the Egyptian state treats Copts as a 'problem to be managed' rather than citizens. Mehrez (2012: 146) claims this misrepresentation translated into two reactions: 'a predominantly disgruntled Coptic Diaspora that exposes, at the international level, the discriminatory practices of the Egyptian state' and an 'equally disgruntled, visibly less docile, and dominated Coptic minority within Egypt' (Mehrez 2012: 146). Examples of this disgruntled discourse of the Coptic migrant minorities reviewed for this essay, is the blog Coptic Nationalism, and Coptic activist Majdi Khalil, who has a fair share of media exposure and currently has his own YouTube channel.

More importantly, laws can be used to discriminate towards the Copts. El-Ezaby Pasha, the Deputy Interior Minister laid 10 questions in 1934 to regulate Church-building permits (Brownlee 2013: 8). Among other restrictions, the questions implied that 'new Churches should be a reasonable distance from existing mosques [and Churches] and they should enjoy the consent of the neighbouring Muslim population...' (ibid). In practical terms, El-Ezaby's conditions prevented Copts from constructing or renovating their Churches (ibid; Daring Question 2009q). President Sisi, however, made his pledge to build new Churches 'in the wake of a deadly attack in Central Egypt' (The New Arab 2018). The president attended Christmas Mass in a Coptic Church (Daring Question 2016p) and in his tenancy a new cathedral was inaugurated (Reuters 2018). Khalil claims that Sadat promised in an Islamic conference to impoverish the Copts to the point of rendering them beggars on the street (Daring Question 2009q). However, Khalil recognised there had been changes since the President Sisi attended the Mass, although he was not hopeful for real change (Daring Question 2016p). Khalil (ibid) argues that Egyptian state is a deep Islamic state, hence Copts are treated like dhimmis where their lives are not equals to Muslim lives; he also claims that the only time bombers targeting Churches received capital punishment only when Muslim blood is spilled. This tirade is reproduced to illustrate the point of this section: there is an aggressive discourse which carries the undertone of victimhood and resentment. Many scholars [(Mehrez 2012; Brownlee 2013) as well as Rabboudi and Abdel-Samad

in Box of Islam] point to the infringement on the rights of the Copts and even call them second class citizens. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) argues that since Egyptian law has to follow the Sharia it cannot give equal citizenship to Christians. Addin lilah wal-watan lil jami' – religion is for God and the homeland is for everybody – is another slogan that has proven ineffective in creating this unity (Mehrez 2012). Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019a) points out that the term Watan, although meant to signify Patrie or homeland, does not embody the full Western concept of homeland, let alone to embody the philosophical concept of states and democracy.

The representation of the Coptic community is a reflection of their marginalization. Researching Coptic and Cinema in the library's search engine of an academic institution, only one book chapter by Samia Mehrez was relevant to this topic; it discusses *Bahib Issima*. In order to be able to conduct this study, I had to actively seek films with Coptic representation while avoiding the stereotypical representation that includes, according to Mehrez (2012:149), 'the exploitative calculating clerk, or the liberal/loose Coptic woman, or in sharp contrast, simply the good, devout cross-bearing Copt.' Citing the movie *Fatima wa Marika wa Rachel* (Rafla 1949) where a Muslim man tries to seduce three different women by pretending to be of the same faith, and reproducing 'various stereotypical markers of the faith to win over the girl's family' ends up marrying the Muslim woman as she is 'morally superior to the Christian and the Jew' (ibid). Hassan w Merqus w Cohen (Jazeirly 1954) similarly produces the stereotypical images of Christian and Jewish faith (Mehrez 2012). The greedy Copt who exploits the underprivileged Muslim is also reproduced in the critically acclaimed *Imarat Yaacobian* in both the novel and the movie adaptation (ibid)

This complicates the issue of the Coptic representation. They are present in the cultural discourse; they are visible on the screen but as 'other' (Mehrez 2012). In a way, the stereotypical representation makes Coptic representation a 'visual' as in the optical verification of a procedure of power that only requires the audience 'receiving loud and clear'. (Daney 1999)

*Bahib Issima* (Fawzi 2004) is the odd one out. But does this movie negate Copts as a missing image? In a way this movie translates personal oppression into a national one and there were several calls to read Adli as an Egyptian (Mehrez 2012). This is echoed in the Egyptian press with El-Shenawi (2019), who considered the movie to be the bravest in representing the Coptic family as Egyptian first. From the position of this research, this is the ultimate recommendation for its

alternative narrative when minorities' representation is concerned: to have their image as a reflection of the national one.

However, there was a problem in this case. The Coptic community, led by the Coptic Orthodox Church, rejected the movie, 'called for its boycott and crippling it financially' (Mehrez 2012: 163). The film was a commercial failure since it was labelled a festival film and condemned to a disadvantageous release time [June is exam time and adults were home bound with their children]. Furthermore, with all the negative coverage, the film was not deemed as clean cinema.

Chronicled in her article, Mehrez (2012) detailed the procedures that *Bahib Issima* had to go through to get released. This is more indicative of the level of control the state exerts on the public representation and how it can successfully manipulate those involved in order to champion itself as a defender of artistic freedom. Before the filming, a higher committee for censorship approved the script, but the unprecedented realistic representation prompted a submission to a committee before its release date, which 'routinely become a strategic way to diffuse such responsibility and to remap the limits of representation within the context of the official discourse on "freedom of thought and expression"'. (Mehrez 2012:157) One Copt was present who objected to several scenes. Voicing her objections prompted the creation of another committee which reflects 'the hierarchy among various actors within the cultural sphere ranging from civil servants in the office of the Egyptian censor, to prominent intellectuals from both the Muslim and Coptic communities, and finally to the upper echelon of representatives from the Ministry of Culture' (Mehrez 2012:157). Coptic objections were minor in the second committee. The third committee, comprised of predominantly Coptic intellectuals, expressed enthusiasm towards the film, but noted it will cause controversy and recommended another committee. Dr Gabir Asfur – who held the posts of secretary-general of the Higher Council for Culture, general director of the Office of the Censor and professor of Arabic literature at Cairo University – headed this committee. Caving to media pressure, he extended an invitation to the Coptic Church. This was prompted by the leak of the first member of committee to the Church, and the Church reproducing a pattern of 'intervention of Muslim religious authorities and groups in cultural affairs' (Mehrez 2012: 158). According to Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019a; 2019f), the state upholds the rules of law, however Middle Eastern states are still in construction. As shown in this case, the inclusion of religious authorities aims to 'reconfirm the state's moral authority over its citizen' (Mehrez 2012:158). The makers objected to the inclusion of the Church, arguing that the script was already approved; the press supported their

endeavour to block this intervention, reminding of the intervention of Al-Azhar in the cultural field. The creators then organised a private screening for journalists, intellectuals, filmmakers and critics, moving the debate from the private to the public arena and 'high-jacking the state and the Church's moral authority over the film' (Mehrez:2012: 158). This prompted a series of enthusiastic and supportive comments from the audience. It proved effective, as the fourth committee met without the priests and recommended the release of the movie with a verdict to 'remove the word religion from Layla Ilwi's pronouncement in the film "Damn this world and religion" (mal'un abu l-dunya ala l- din), cut the kissing scene in the Church tower, and shorten the rowdy family fight inside the Church' (Mehrez 2012: 160). The film was branded adults only, which prompted Yusuf Usman, the young actor who played the lead in the movie, to question 'how a film starring a child [can] be released to adults only?' (ibid). It is interesting to note that Yusuf is Muslim, and he had to leave his primary Islamic school since the headmaster persecuted him for committing a haram: acting in a film. The makers asserted that their film 'is against all forms of oppression where "cinema" in the title is synonymous to "freedom"' (Mehrez 2012: 157). The Coptic Church persevered; they filed a case against the film for contempt of religion in which it was claimed that the film

misrepresents the reality of the Coptic community and its values insofar as the main character Adli (a devout member of the Coptic Orthodox Church) is married to Ni'mat (a Protestant), a highly unrepresentative example of marriage in the Coptic community; the film represents the Copts as fanatic; the film misrepresents the principle of chastity within a Coptic marriage; the film advocates sinful relationships; the film misrepresents basic Christian teachings about sin and repentance; the film offers a highly negative and vulgar image of the Coptic extended family; the film misrepresents the Coptic religious authorities and the Church itself through scenes that violate the sanctity of the holy place; the film misrepresents Christ and ultimately, God himself and our relationship with him (Mehrez 2012: 162).

Adding to this list, Usama Fawzi was accused of being a self-hating Copt since he converted to Islam to marry a Muslim woman (ibid). It worth noting that the Coptic Church used the national unity banner in their campaign against the film and called on their fellow Muslim religious authority for support, asking 'Is that how our Muslim Brothers perceive us?' (ibid:163).

The Coptic Church followed a strategy from al-Azhar play book. They have failed in stopping the film's release. It is unclear if the Church or the community believes that el-Azhar would have

succeeded in a similar case. Azzi (Azzi, Tannous 2021) claimed that minorities in the Middle East have an identity crisis. While living in Shobra, the town in which *Bahib Issima* was based, she recounted being able to recognise Coptic women from how they carried themselves, stating these women channel their conservative values without needing to wear a veil. On a final note, this extensive review of the media discourse and the fight undertaken by the Coptic Church to stop a movie aimed to suggest their malaise with this representation. The imagined image of Coptic community could not be constructed in this video from the available sources. Launching an investigation to produce these images was not possible due to a lack in funding. However, it is certainly a topic of interest that can be explored at a later stage.

## 5.0 Results: From counter-narratives to cultural productions; a framework and a thematic approach

In this chapter, the framework for cultural productions as counter-narratives is presented. It is important to note that this is by no means a call to suspend the ad campaigns. They serve a different function which is to pierce through the extremists' narratives in support of the redirect method (Helmus, Klein 2018). The premise of this framework is to strengthen the multiplicity in identity construct and challenge cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere. It is worth noting that in November 2019 a heavy crackdown on Telegram booted extremist channels from this application. Reports emerged on their discovery of the blockchain messaging (BCM) apps where they can create supergroups of 100,000 people (Gilbert 2019). This might complicate counter-narratives efforts since BCM provide 'secure, anonymous communication [no need to provide phone numbers], a tamper-proof repository for beheading videos and other ISIS propaganda, and perhaps most ominously, the ability to transfer cryptocurrency anywhere in the world' (ibid). If extremists' propaganda is going to become more difficult to intercept, then the shift in approach becomes more necessary. Since this framework is conceived for mainstream cultural productions, it the solution to this problem.

### Overview of the framework

This framework adheres to the offensive and defensive techniques as suggested by Reed et. al (2017), where a counter-narrative deconstructs, and an alternative narrative promotes. The recommendations of this framework are built on the practice inquiry and discussions with practitioners. Needless to say, the product of counter-narratives should strive to promote critical thinking and share accurate historical fact without stooping to any attempts to insult Islam. The alterative narrative's products are a celebration of the heritage of the area that is covered, whether Muslim or of other communities. In a nutshell, this framework is advocating an indirect approach to addressing cognitive extremism and creating positive and emotionally engaging stories to assert values of democracy, diversity and human rights.

## Model for practitioners

The framework limits its advice and pointers to the early stages of content development. Afterwards, it trusts practitioners to adhere to standard practice in producing and distributing their content. However, in order to support practitioners in their decision making, I have developed the flowchart below.

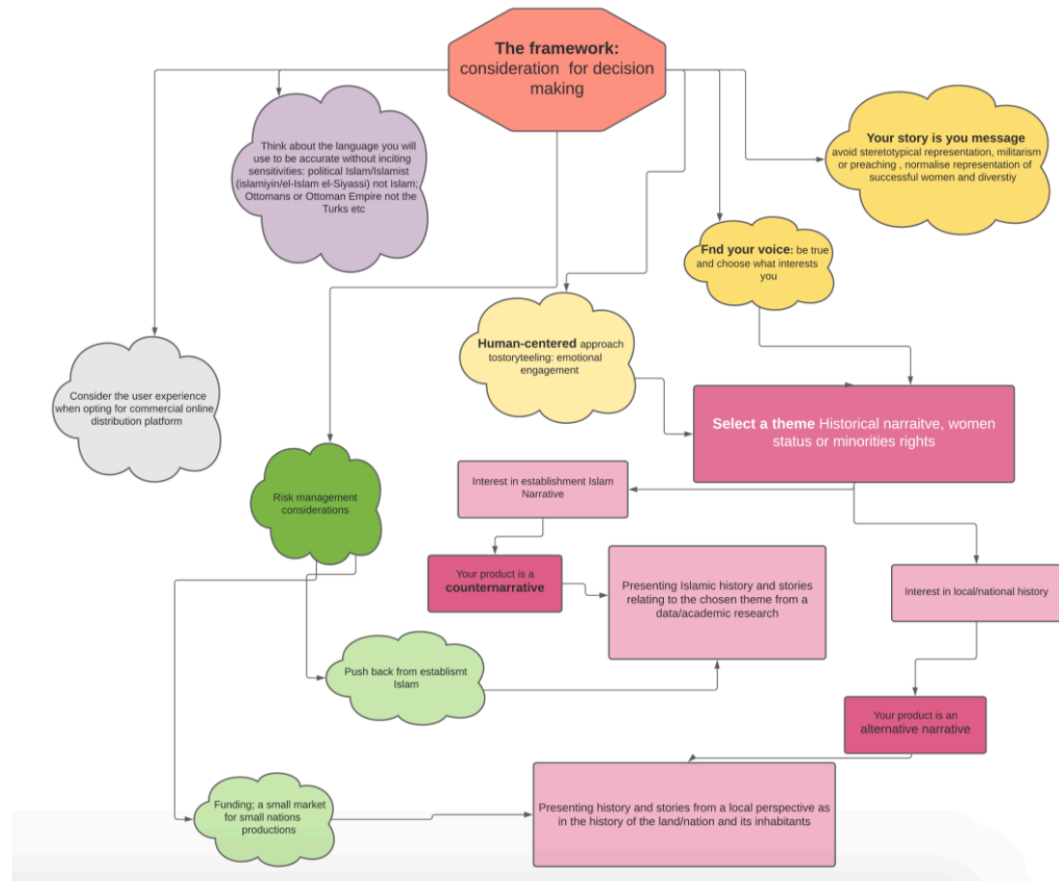


Figure 3 Model for practitioners: developed to support their decision making. The steps to follow to define their product are in rectangles. Other considerations are in the coloured cloud shaped forms

This flowchart offers practitioners a step-by-step guide to defining the product they are developing based on their interest. Once that is established, it presents them with considerations to keep in mind. The following text discusses in further detail the content of the flowchart.

- **Find your voice:** reflect on your storytelling strength and define your interest
- **Select a theme from the list:** theme can be selected from: Historical narrative, women status or minorities rights.



- **Define your product:** if challenging the mainstream Islamic narrative is what interests you, then your product is considered a counter-narrative since it will focus on debunking myths and promoting facts and critical thinking. The mainstream Islamic narrative is transnational; it is the same across national borders and explains the stark similarities that can be found in discourses of Islamist preachers of different nationalities. If you are interested more in the local and the national, then the product is an alternative narrative. El-Qemani's (September 8, 2018) suggests that Islamists' narrative is dissociated from a particular land. A complex local identity is then presented as an alternative to the single identity of Islamists. Hence, the product of this section aims to promote the national singularity or cultural difference specific to a nation-state (Bhabha 1990). This needs to recognise the diversity of the population and the cultural exchange or regional shared history if and when it occurred. Research your local history, language and customs, your representation should reflect that picture.
- **Human-centric approach:** focus on the human lived experience to build emotional engagement. In fiction, place your characters in situations that showcase their struggle (*Orid Hallan, Sabah*). Your documentaries can debunk historical misconceptions from a historical figure's perspective, recreate the historical scene in an accurate representation. Do not use films to illustrate the era unless they recreated the era accurately.
- **Think about your language:** it is important to use language that does not incite hate, so it is political Islam and not just Islam, particularly in the West. This might not be needed since this framework is conceived to tackle their worldview indirectly. However, it is important to refer to the Ottomans as Ottomans not the Turks, Abbasside not the Iraqi etc unless using this lingo is needed to set your character as anti-hero.
- **Analyse your risks:** choosing the alternative narrative might increase your financial risk. On the other hand, even if conducted indirectly and in the most respectful manner, there might be a push back from establishment Islam to your movies. This research is aware that the risk of losing commissions might deter cultural practitioners from counter-narratives; this is why academics are flagged as the primary source of content for them. Trusting their adherence to factual representation of data, research institutions may pose limited risk to academics' job security. Academics can rely video-essays or even documentaries to share their research data with a wider audience.

- **Normalise representation:** of successful women, diversity in the communities whether it is ethnic diversity, sexual orientation and/or religious beliefs. In the West, normalise the cultural differences between the Muslim communities.
- **Avoid:** militarism, ill placed monologue that aims to deliver a preaching message to the audience, a group of pan-regional characters unless there is a valid storytelling reason. Be truthful to cultural singularities and similarities.
- **Your story is your message:** This is an embodiment of the 'show do not tell' mantra repeated in film schools and scriptwriting books and seminars. To exemplify how this framework can be approached, I will discuss the example of democracy from Schmidt's list. In the media discourse, political Islamic parties are already accused of wanting to exploit the democratic process to reach and monopolise power without having any governing plan (Box of Islam 2019b). Cultural productions should aim to exert a positive influence on that discourse. It should not create a story where the protagonist debates an Islamist on the value of secularity and democracy. These debates are better left for civil rights activists and political scholars. Instead, they should ensure an accurate historical representation of the life of a subject living in the utopia the Islamists are preaching about. These characters can be Muslim or non-Muslims, men or women, free or enslaved. Islamist discourse idealises the Caliphate and present the Caliphate as the only time when Muslims were proud and powerful, however they never touch on the rights of the subjects since these rights are the foundation of democratic states (El-Qemani September 8, 2016). The collective work of cultural producers and academics in this angle aims to move the discourse away from an abstract discussion of an idealised past to a concrete discussion of a governing plan that is lacking in Islamist discourse (Box of Islam 2019). This example is simply meant as a guide on how to approach the theory and suggestions detailed in the section themes for thematic content. This framework advocates an indirect approach without talking heads delivering message. This does not mean the experts in documentaries or video-essays commenting on an artefact or a reconstruction from factual data. This means that fictional storytelling needs to embody the aim or the value you want to promote. Cast A-list stars if possible. *Philadelphia* is a good example of this. The film featured a gay lawyer (played by Tom Hanks) discriminated against for having AIDS and a homophobic lawyer (played by Denzel Washington) representing him in court. The film grossed \$206 million, a strong indicator of wide audience reception and most importantly 'helped foster awareness about AIDS

and compassion towards sufferers’, the aim set by its creator (Powel 2018).

- **Consider your audience user experience** when choosing an online distribution platform. That said, online campaigns can be beneficial for promotion, especially if influencers are engaged to push the product or a specific character.

#### Framework’s summary

The table below summarises how this framework envisages navigating counter and alternative narratives in the cultural sphere. Since it is presented like a strategy for content development, it is organised in two sections: production and distribution. The production section lists the themes of content: historical narratives, women’s status and minorities’ rights. They are relevant to counter and alternative narratives. However, since it takes production risk management into consideration, the framework recommends that counter-narratives be produced by academics via video-essays and documentaries. Alternative narratives are thus entrusted to cultural practitioners to develop films and television series. The distribution section discusses the target audience and the platforms to reach them.

#### Section one - Production: themes for content development and content creators

Themes for Content development			Content creators	Outputs format
<b>Historical narratives</b>	Counter-narratives	primarily by	Academics	Video-essays& Documentaries
	Alternative narratives		Cultural producers	Feature films & TV series
<b>Women’s status</b>	Counter-narratives	primarily by	Academics	Video-essays& Documentaries
	Alternative narratives		Cultural producers	Feature films & TV series
<b>Minorities’ rights</b>	Counter-narratives	primarily by	Academics	Video-essays& Documentaries
	Alternative narratives		Cultural producers	Feature films & TV series

#### Section two - Distribution: Medium and audience

<b>Platform</b>	Mainstream media
	Online distribution platforms like Netflix, Amazon, Shahed etc
	Blogs
	Video-essays journals
<b>Audience</b>	General audience (selection more project specific)

*Table 4 The framework for cultural productions as counter-narratives*

#### Section one: Production or Content Creation:

This section details what is needed to be developed and by whom as summarised in the table above. It is divided to two sections: themes for content development and content creators

#### Themes for content development

Following Ferguson's (2016) positive review of the impact of drama on violent extremism, this section aims to suggest the type of content needed. Three themes are identified: historical Islamic narrative, women status and minorities' rights. In each theme, there is a theoretical discussion that summarises the discourse along with some notes on how to approach this angle discussed under two headings: the counter-narrative and the alternative narrative. Practitioners need to note that the theoretical discussion is an overview of media discourse and will need to conduct their own extensive research relevant to their productions.

##### i. First theme: Historical Islamic Narrative

*The aim here is to challenge and correct the inaccuracies of transnational and national historical narrative and promote critical thinking*

Extremists' narrative relies on history to achieve five goals according to Reed and Dowling (2008: 100-101): (1) it expands the sense of crisis by linking the present one to an older crisis; (2) it supports the solution to prove its feasibility; (3) it reinforces the in-group out-group dynamics

by establishing lineage and connecting the current struggle to past one, giving the impression of a permanent struggle between them; (4) it strengthens the legitimacy and credibility of the messenger by linking them to a revered personality; (5) it uses historical prophecies that give it legitimacy by connecting past events to prophecies, justifies a certain action and creates a sense of urgency of an impending crisis predicted by the prophecy. It worth noting that many consider Islamic reform a solution of this problem. Hammingsen and Castro (2017:29) warn against government involvement in supporting and promoting moderate Islam since it will be 'construed as partisan and discriminatory, contradicting the declared secularism of the state and thereby becoming a symptom of double standards, again risking further marginalisation and polarisation.' Abdel-Samad (2016) points out that there are some Western universities who are teaching moderate Islam, like Mohanad Khorshid in Germany, but the main challenge is sustaining this moderate version Islam, even in the West, considering the current structure and the influence of political Islam. For example, an inclusive mosque was opened in Germany for all faith to pray in but since it has a woman for an Imam there was an immediate statement to delegitimise it from mainstream Turkish institutions and el-Azhar (Box of Islam 2017a).

However, as discussed earlier it is the political element inherent in Islam that needs to be addressed. Political Islamic parties, even militant ones like Al-Qaeda and ISIS, have a theological and jurisprudence foundation in the early books of Islam and the Quran, and these values and ideas are taught in schools and are anchored in popular culture. With failing states, they posit Islam as the solution blaming the current situation on a bad religion, and they harbour a hostility towards the West due to its immoral values. The political discourse of Islamist parties promotes social justice; regardless of the terminology they use, they model the vision of the state on early Islam 'confederate's' arrangement (el-Qemani September 8, 2018) and cite the terms of first four Caliphs as the foundation of good governance. The existence of these four Caliphs is put to question due to lack of historical evidence (Box of Islam 2019h).

The mainstream Islamic narrative advocates an illiterate virtuous man who was dictated a code directly from God. Upon his Hijra to Medina he established a state, freed the slaves and gave women their rights. The textual review of YouTube channels showed that poking holes in the accuracy of the mainstream narrative is a common tactic. However, the delivery mode is lecture based. This approach has its merit. The authority of the messenger is recognised. However, it can also be a hindrance since the identity of the messenger might deter audience from watching and engaging with the ideas. What follows is a brief overview of the historical discussion in the media discourse; it includes historicity and historical Mohamed, the Quran creation or evolution

and the Language of the Quran.

#### Historicity and historical Mohamed

El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) claims that Islam has presented the Arabs [meaning the tribes living in the Arabian Peninsula and not the East-Mediterraneans and north-Africans colonised by the Islamic conquests] with their tribal norms and rulings. He argues that for Mohamed to create his confederation it was impossible to unite the different tribes under Hobal [Arabian pagan God]. Therefore he concocted the idea of moulding the different tribes into the one tribe of God, regressing them from the second Jahilia [the open society made possible by commerce] to the first Jahilia [waging wars for money] (ibid). Islam clashes with modernity (Daring Question, 2015a). This is aggravated by political Islam presenting the tribal confederation of the 7<sup>th</sup> century as an alternative way of life (El-Qemani September 8, 2018) supported by a popular belief that the best century is that of the Prophet, followed by the Sahaba (the companions of the Prophet). This belief is based on a Hadith (Mohamed's speech) mentioned in the two books considered the cornerstone of this discipline [Bokhari 2652 and Muslim 2533].

Mohamed (570, 632) is the role model for Muslims. He recited the Quran inspired directly by God via the archangel Gabriel. Muslim scholars pride themselves with the meticulous methodology followed to select and authenticate the Hadith (Mohamed's speeches). The most reliable sources are Sahih Bukhari (810, 870) and Sahih Muslim (821, 875). The Syra is Mohamed's biography written by Ibn Ishac (704, 770) on the Caliph's command; his version is lost. The one available today is the edited version of Ibn Hisham (died 833) who states in its introduction that he omitted some stories he judged harmful to the Prophet. The disparity between the events' occurrence and the earliest written Islamic accounts, in addition to a near absence of archaeological and independent sources, are highly problematic for academic historians. Mohamed's name appeared for the first time inscribed in the dome of the rock, the mosque built by Abdel Malik ben Marwan in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The inscription 'Mohamed rassoul el-Allah', from the lens of a Syro-Aramiac literate translates to: 'Praised be God's messenger' and is interpreted by some as a direct reference to Christ especially since some unorthodox schools in early Christendom rejected the deity of Christ (Box of Islam 2015a; Box of Islam 2015b).

Did Mohamed really exist, and if he did what was his real name? Messelmani (Daring Question 2016b; Box of Islam 2015v) stresses the abundance of contradictory stories. Qotham Bin Abdel-Lat seems to be the most likely name; making Mohamed a title inspired from the Bible [John's bible, and Song of songs] (Daring Question 2010q; Box of Islam 2015b). However, while there is an abundance of contradicting stories, there are details of important people who are totally eclipsed from Mohamed's life. For example Waraqa Ben nawfal is his wife's cousin and the priest who conducted his wedding ceremony; the Ebonite (a Christian heresy [sic]) priest was preparing Mohamed to be his successor according to Hariri (Daring Question 2010e; 1979) and he continues to claim that the first revelations of the Quran (The Mecca Part) is an Arabic translation of the Ebonite bible.

Islamic tradition described symptoms that coincide with inspiration; it led some medical experts (Sadeghian 2006; Korkut 2001; Box of Islam 2015b, Daring Question 2011b; 2011c) to argue that Mohamed suffered from frontal lobe epilepsy. This diagnosis, similar to the case of Dostoevsky, explains the repetitive seizures that incite Mohamed's recitation in an eloquent language in Mecca, and the deterioration of his language (as per the deterioration of his mental health) in Medina coinciding with his increased inclination to violence. This is in addition to side-effects accounted for in numerous texts like: hearing voices, oversensitivity to smells, favouring sweet tastes etc. (ibid).

#### The Quran: creation or evolution

The Quran is believed to be the word of God preserved on a tablet in Arabic, and in this realm, it is preserved to the letter by early Muslim generations as recited by Mohamed (IslamQ&A 2010). Schools across the Middle East teach the story of Othman Bin Affan who re-gathered the Quran and burned all earlier copies. Four copies were made, and he sent them to the provinces. None of these copies are found (Box of Islam 2015ac).

The oldest manuscript, found in Sanaa, is a Palimpsest dating to mid-late 7<sup>th</sup> century; the manuscripts preserved in the Paris Library, Birmingham University, Sanaa, the British Library and Samarkand date between late 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century. None of these copies are complete versions of the Quran. Near complete copies are available in Cairo and Topkapi but they date to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. These are all the surviving copies. (Daring Question 2015u, 2015v; 2017b, Box of Islam 2015c; 2015d; 2015u, 2015t, 2015ae; 2018a).

The Sanaa Palimpsest, according to Dr Puin (Daring Question 2015v), proves that there is a change in the text and a difference in the order of Suras from today's Quran. Since this manuscript dates back to the era of Abdel Malik ben Marwan, it reasserts the belief that he shaped Islam as we know it today (Box of Islam 2016s) or fuels the argument that Mohamed had nothing to do with the Quran (Holland 2012).

Once subjected to narrative analysis, scholars argue that the Quran retells non-canonical early Christian texts (per example the Infancy bible), Jewish stories (from Midrash Rabbah in particular), stories adopted from Alexandre Romance and some adaptations from St Jacob and St Augustin (Box of Islam 2015e; 2015f; 2016y; 2016ab, 2016a)

### *The language of the Quran*

There are two periods for the Quran: Medina is the last revelation period that abrogated the first period of Mecca. However, Theodor Nöldeke (Daring Question 2012b) argues Mecca period should be divided to three distinct periods.

Patricia Crone aimed to reconstruct Islamic history from outside the Islamic sources. According to her, Mecca cannot be a centre of trade, which questions if the Quran was born in Arabia. She advocates Petra as a likely candidate of the Quran's origin, due to the Quran's mention of olive trees in the Prophet's city and a proximity to a salt statue, as a direct allusion to Lot's wife (Holland 2012). Moreover, the themes discussed (per example nature of Christ) do not concern polytheist Meccans but are topics of debate for Levantine Christians (Box of Islam 2015e).

Christopher Luxenberg (Box of Islam 2015ad, 2015af) advocates the Syro-Aramaic language as key to decode the Quranic texts, given that it was the *lingua franca* of the time. Arabic at this time was a primitive language containing just 15 letters and therefore, could not sustain such a complex text (ibid). The Quran today uses 28 letters and 14 characters that were developed under the Abbasside Empire. Gabriel Sawma (Daring Question 2012k, 2012o) states that early manuscripts were written with 22 non-dotted letters, and that a Syro-Aramaic literate could read them easily. His angle puts some words, especially those disagreed upon by early Muslim scholars, into context (examples include Quran, forqan, ALM etc).



### *Notes for practitioners*

*Counter-narrative: deconstruct the foundation myth of the Islamic state by challenging inaccurate historical narratives based on academic research and historical evidence*

The desired outcome of this angle is to promote critical thinking and educate about factual historical events. This can be achieved by representing the ideas summarised above in a more engaging style than lecture-based and can produce content that fills the gap in the discourse.

*Presenting these ideas under different form:* The different programmes, particularly *Box of Islam* and *Early history of Islam*, had done a tremendous job in creating the first go-to depository for information on early Islam for Arabic speakers. Mohamed Lmasiah, the host of *Early History of Islam* and an expert on Quran manuscripts, announced an online course in collaboration with the German research group Inara. Abdel-Samad in the early episodes of his show (2015) invites his audience to be critical and do their own research, which should be the point of this angle. Engaging with this material and repackaging its message, whether as documentaries for mainstream media channels, video-essays for online distribution or fiction, will increase the impact of this angle.

*The gap in the discourse:* While early Islam dominates the discourse, the era when Hadith and Syra were collected is not in the spotlight. Hadith and Syra are singled out herein as per el-Behiri's argument that they justify terrorist actions. Also, they feature in the hate speech directed towards Muslims and the Islamic extremists' speeches aiming to recruit Muslims to fight the Holy War. Questioning if these texts reflect early Islam or the Abbasside empire is nearly inexistent in the public debate. Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2017) pinpoints that Ibn Taymyah is the favourite scholar for extremists and considered a reformist for moderate institutions. However, he was deemed too radical for the Abbasside empire, a time where a slave woman led the prayer drunk. It is worth remembering that El-Behiri refutes some Hadith if they contradict the goodness and the high morals of the Prophet. This is a belief shared by millions of Muslims; even Mohamed X, the counter-narrative video, directs the youth to follow the good example of the Prophet in their daily life. Since Hadith and Syra are crucial in documenting his behaviour, it is important to question if they are political documents truthful to the Abbassid

era instead of historical documents recounting early Islam. More importantly, is the image of the Prophet, drawn from these texts, a reflection of the historical Mohamed or of that era's ruling elite? Questioning the accuracy of these chains of narration in the public psyche can facilitate the task of counter-narratives and reformists. Raising these questions is the important task, although it may instigate a furious backlash. It should not be expected from this investigation, or the cultural product, to pinpoint to a Caliph that stained the image of the Prophet. Ideally, this can be approached as the stress that creates systematic evolution (Taleb 2018), and pressures mainstream institution into presenting new evidence if they have it or justify their lack of interest in conducting the inquiry. The aim from all this is to engage in a constructive debate where Hadith and Syra can be discussed as historical or socio-political documents instead of basis for law in modern times.

*Alternative narrative: aim to tell the history from a local perspective. In the case of early Arabia, it should reflect the diversity and the tolerance attributed to its polytheists*

The Islamic historical narrative is uniform globally. It stands out as a uniform narrative that crosses borders and is the basis of defining Muslims by their Muslim-ness. The story of early Islam can be retold from a local perspective. Needless to say, it should be factual, celebrating the local and Arabian heritage without playing to a supremacy angle. The desired outcome of this alternative narrative is to enable a multiplicity in identity. Identity politics tends to homogenise populations and to dilute national, cultural or economical structures by favouring a single identity (Islamic, Arabic, Aramaic). Challenging this single identity definition and highlighting differences without defacing or denying regional shared history is essential. Identity is a theoretical construct of sameness within a nation and difference with others (Bhabha 2013). The national unique singularity can be easily fulfilled if indigenous minorities are represented in the national narrative. National theories are selected here as they have a better chance of limiting cognitive resistance to cultural change. The content derived from this angle needs to highlight the local histories and focus the framework on the people living within a national border.

ii. Second theme: Women status

*The aim here is to promote human rights, especially those of women, as equal in society, by normalising the representation of empowered women from all factions of society.*

Schmid's list notes the necessity to develop human rights. Women's rights in Islam are a topic of constant debate. Nation-states offered new possibilities to define 'sameness and difference' that replaced the religious imagining (Bahabha 1990) and enabled a self-identification as other from an underprivileged political position within the national borders. This enabled the feminist activists' quest to acquire their full rights as citizens and explains the movement flexibility in embracing ethno-racial and queer discourses (Kaplan 2000). In the West, it took three waves of feminist activism to translate these rights into laws.

It is observable that extremist fundamentalist groups tend to oppress women's rights upon gaining power. Once the Taliban assumed power in Afghanistan, they imposed veil on women and burned cinemas. Once ISIS succeeded in their coup and declared the Caliphate, they articulated their specific expectation of their jihadi wives and reinstated the cult of domesticity for women (Saul 2015). Controlling women and imposing a certain demeanour seems consistent with Islamists' interpretation of morality (El-Qemani September 8, 2018).

Certainly, there are lessons to be learned from western experiences in countering an oppressive patriarchal ideology. Per example Johnston (2000) called for a strategy for women's cinema. Her idea remains relevant nowadays. Zanaz (2015: 1) states that a 'Muslim woman is not born, she is constructed'; his depiction of women's reality in the Islamic world mirrors Kaplan's (1988:7) criticism of Hollywood's patriarchal films where 'women are refused a voice' and 'their desire is subjected to men's desire leaving them with the choice of living in frustration or risking their lives in the daring.' Les Fonds Suds has financed several movies that addressed women's issues in Francophone countries; such initiative, although welcome as it made such movies possible, corresponds more to the politics of the French funds and the reception of French audiences rather than the impact these movies have on the community portrayed in these movies. For example, the war is the dominant topic of Lebanese films while women's issues feature heavily in Tunisian cinema.

Storytelling and art projects can have a very important and powerful role to play in aggregating change. In the Egyptian context, there are three examples where films had a positive impact to the point of changing the state's laws (Abdel-Rahman 2016; Iraqi 2014). Relevant to our case is the movie *Orid hallan* (Marzouk 1975). Fatin Hamama portrays a lady who goes to Shariah court to divorce her husband. The film showcased the nearly impossible task and the humiliation that women go through in these courts. In this film, the witnesses provided by the husband committed perjury, hence she lost her case after four years of struggle. As a consequence of this movie, the Egyptian state introduced a new law – el-Khale3 – where a woman can divorce easily if she forfeits the husband's due alimony (Abdel-Rahman 2016; Iraqi 2014).

The mainstream Islamic narrative claims that Islam championed women's rights in the Arabian Peninsula, saving them from infanticide and giving them inheritance (Ahmed 2011). This claim needs to be fact checked in the media discourse. In Pre-Islamic Arabia, el-Lat, el-Uza, and Manaf were the Goddesses Triad worshiped in Mecca. Like older Abrahamic religions, the sacred feminine was overlooked by Islam to worship one masculine entity. Each tribe considered an ancestor as a protector; these Gods and Goddesses were messengers to lift their needs and wishes to the almighty God (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). In the case of inheritance, the Islamic narrative recounts that Khadija, Mohamed's first wife, was divorced once and also previously widowed. Therefore, she inherited her husband's business, employed Mohamed and initiated their marriage proposal (Ahmed 1986). Polygyny as well as polyandry was practiced in Mecca and Medina but Islamic 'polygyny [as in one man marries and maintains a number of women in one or more establishments] seems to have been an innovation of Mohamed'. If it was practiced beforehand it was not very widespread; it was easy for a woman to divorce her husband by simply turning her tent around, a tradition that Islam abolished and introduced idda [a waiting period for women to wait before remarrying] (ibid: 69).

Women in *Jahilia* [Age of ignorance as referred to by Islamic scholars] were 'priests, soothsayers, prophets, participants in warfare, and nurses in the battlefield... They were fearlessly outspoken, defiant critics of men' (Ahmed 1992 :62). For-example Assma bint Marwan was a poet who criticised Mohamed, therefore he ordered her death (Daring Question 2008d). Islam terminated the freedom of women and imposed segregation (Ahmed 1992). Zaki (2016) claims that infanticide was eradicated for both boys and girls, arguing that Mohamed's father was meant to

be sacrificed however, a female soothsayer saved his life. The story is recounted in Ibn Ishac's Syra.

Briefly, in Arabia depending on the tribe in question, women's status may have worsened or gotten better after Islam (Ahmed 1992). The narrative completely overlooks the status of women in the countries that were colonised by Arabians. For instance, the Amazigh queen Queen Dihya (al-Kahina means priestess) led her army to fight the Arabs' colonising armies and died in battle, leading to many women and children captured as slaves (Daring Question 2018f).

Most importantly, these changes introduced by Islam still affect women's status today. Islamic Sharia defines a woman as half of a man in inheritance and testimony in court. The Iranian penal code Article 297 sets the Diya [blood money paid when someone is murdered] for a man at 100 camels and in the case of injuring his left testicular at 66 camels, his right at 33 (Abdel-Samad 2016: 112). The higher figure is due to the belief that the left testicular are where the boys are made. A woman's Diya is 50 camels. In case of rape, Article 441 entitles a woman to claim the 'dowry she might have commanded on marriage' which may be worth more than her life (ibid).

A 'woman is above all a mother' according to president Erdogan (Agence France Press 2016; Abdel-Rahman 2016). The Muslim Brotherhood stresses that a woman's priority is her husband and children (Ahmed 2011) but does not forbid her from pursuing a career with the exception of becoming president or Imam. To be fair to the Brethren, Zeinab el-Ghazali is considered their unsung mother (Ahmed 2011). When members of the Muslim Brotherhood were jailed, the sisters (their female members) smuggled their letters out of prison (ibid). The sisters also helped recruit other women, promoting the wear hijab and enabling the Islamic Sahewa in the 1980s (ibid). As aforementioned, ISIS in a communiqué limits women's role to mothers, wives and housewives. Women can be wed at nine years of age; a girl is allowed to go to school since the age of seven as long as she stops at her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. She can learn about 'Islam, Arabic language, sewing, cooking and any craft' that can prepare her to her appointed role. It is absolutely not needed 'for a woman to travel to pursue further education in order to prove herself more intelligent than a man.' (Saul 2015).

Countering the cult of domesticity is not specific to Islam. The three waves of western feminism, from the suffragettes to lipstick feminists countered similar issues and succeeded to secure their rights (Kaplan 1988). Islamists brand feminism as a Western imposition of culture (Kroløkke, Sørensen 2006). They accuse feminists of promiscuity, while championing the veil as a sign of modesty, and some advocate female genital mutilation. Hence, feminists may be easily

dismissed by Islamists and Arabic-speaking media. Moghissi (1999 cited Ftouni 2011: 167) defines the 'daunting task' that faces Islamic feminists by the necessity to establish a counter-discourse method against anti-Islamic prejudice without getting caught up in an 'apologetic or self-denying defence of Islamic gender practices or a justification of the oppressive discourses of Islamist ideologues and rulers'. A central argument is that men created Islam without women's involvement, and some feminists are trying to take back the narrative (Box of Islam 2017u)

Leila Ahmed (1992:238) characterises 'establishment Islam' as the language of the politically powerful that is 'legalistic and culturally authoritarian version of Islam that is hostile to women'; whereas 'lay Islam' has an ethical and egalitarian voice that 'marginalised groups speak and Muslim women hear therefore they declare that Islam is non-sexist.' An Islamic feminist hermeneutic affirms the egalitarian nature of True Islamic ideals. Although frequently referred to, the concept of True Islamic ideals is an elusive one, and religious institutions still yield a lot of influence.

Ftouni (2011: 163) expresses an urgent need for an Arab feminist epistemology, one that regards

the existential reality of 'being a woman' as a priori to becoming Arab (Muslim, Jew, Christian, Secular, heterosexual, homosexual). An objective of such epistemology is to retrieve the agency of Arab women, who are excluded from, or misrepresented within the narratives of History, culture, politics and knowledge but 'starts again with 'different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals. An Arab feminist epistemology requires a strategic double move, to both empiricise the lived experiences of women in Arab societies, and to theorise new ways of knowing and representing.

While the epistemology is needed, the term Arab is problematic on account of both identity and language. According to Raymond (cited Salameh 2011), Arabic is 'the language of 300 million "non-native speakers..." and 'nobody's first language [...] used only for education, official purposes, written materials, and formal speeches [...] In most Arab countries only the well-educated have adequate proficiency in Arabic while 200 million have not.' Most importantly, social media showcase a tendency to reject the Arabic language, promoting the use of the spoken languages instead. On Twitter @Bellebnene is an example of this tendency, the account handlers hope to standardise the writing of the local language. At this point, some accounts use

the alphabet of Said Akl and others use Latin letters mixed with numbers that emerged as a by-product of using the internet. The latter is used in this thesis.

As an identity, the term Arab depicts a large geographical area stretched over two continents. The constitutions of these countries define them as Arab, yet they house a diversity of ethnic groups (Rabinovich March 31, 2019). Many indigenous minorities in the region reject an Arabic identity. Furthermore, the status of women's rights is country-dependent. Despite major objections, Tunisia abolished a Shariah law granting women equal inheritance laws (MEMO 2018) while the major recent gain in Saudi Arabia was the right to drive a car (Hubbard 2017).

Saudi women are being held hostage by mobile apps that share their location with their male guardian (Bennet 2019). These states are not monoliths; each one derived its country's laws from Shariah and the French constitution (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). Can women's rights activists achieve more progress in their local circumstances relying on citizenship rights protected by the nation-state, or by being part of a regional plan? Since the infringement on their rights is not consistent across borders, a regional plan can certainly offer support and share experience, but the chances of success of a coordinated goal-oriented strategy needs to be examined.

On top of the common themes of feminism, Islamic feminism has two additional topics to deal with: the veil and female genital mutilation, discussed below. Where these topics are concerned, Eltahawy's (2011) warns that feminist tools are used to void feminism out of its meaning and use it against women's freedom and wellbeing.

#### *Female genital mutilation*

Female genital mutilation became illegal in the UK in 2015. However according to an NHS report (NHS 2017) 'between April 2016 and March 2017 there were 9179 cases identified as FGM with 87% of women were born and had the procedure done in an African country and 95% of these girls were under 18 years old, data shows 44% between the age of 5-9' (NHS 2017: 6-7). Medically this practice has absolutely no benefits; actually, it puts women's lives at risk by creating complication at birth without mentioning the negative effect on their sexual health. Furthermore, the Quran does not mention the practice, only Hadith do. A video-essay and a discussion of the media discourse around the topic is conducted in chapter 4.

### *The veil: women's choice or a sign for political Islam*

A statement often heard from Muslim Brothers is that the veil is the first sign of an Islamic nation. Once Khomeini won the 1979 Iranian elections and established Sharia law, he enforced the veil and segregation. Whether imposed by a fundamentalist group or a theocracy, veiling is the sign of Islamic rule and challenging it may have dire consequences. Sheikh el-Qardawi (Daring Question 2008r) states that wearing hijab is a farida [obligation] by the unanimous agreement of Muslim scholars. This statement is based on Quranic texts (Quran, Sura 24, verses 30-31 and Sura 33, verses 59). It is worth noting that Islamic (tafsir) books suggest that distinguishing and protecting free married women from sexual harassment was the reason behind imposing the veil; and that Awra (private parts) of a free woman is her full body but for a slave woman and a man is between the 'bellybutton and the knee' (Daring Question 2008r). Mona el-Tahawi (2011) rejects the face veil completely, claiming it erases the identity of the women who wear it and argues that the veil - the sign of modesty – signifies the hymen, or the sign for virginity. It is worth noting that the veil in general and the face veil in particular is a subject of dispute in Islamic circles. Abdel Samad (Box of Islam 2019a) claims that the discourse around it has shifted from morality towards defining it as a tool of empowerment.

In recent history, a rise in numbers of veiled women in public space coincided with Islamic resurgence – Sahewa- in Egypt and the revolution in Iran (Ahmed 2011; Daring Question 2016j). Women were in the middle of the political movement of the Iranian revolution and the Arab spring. Egyptian women were part of the revolution against Mubarak, and the government subjected the women arrested to virginity tests in order to humiliate them (Rice 2011). Norma Claire Moruzi (1994 Cited Dempsey 2013:122) summarises the feelings of Iranian revolutionary participants who:

... have donned the hijab as a revolutionary symbol and then were surprised by a government that forgot their revolutionary fervour and contribution to the Islamic state. Collectively, they felt betrayed by a national shift that had cut them off from the future they had expected and stranded them in a landscape of changed gender relations that proscribed the conditions of their individual fulfilment

Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019h, Box of Islam 2019b, Box of Islam 2019e) argues that Islamism pitches practices that are Islamawiya [political in nature] and passes it as Islamiya [Islamic as in religious or cultural]. This seems to be support Abdel-Samad's (Box of Islam 2017l) claim that the veil is a sign of Islamisation of the public space. Mahmoud Rasmi (2018) argues that the



European left shows a very apparent double standard around this topic, citing a court case where a veiled woman won the case after refusing to shake hands with men following a job interview. Rasmi (2018) claims this lady has a gendered worldview that is inconsistent with liberals' value system, and that this value system is trumpeted by cultural sensitivity; however, if one of the men she refused to shake hands with was transgender then the left will have no comment on the matter. The author (ibid) attributes this double standard to the left appointing itself a defender of a minority they deem vulnerable, but when two minorities clashes, the left keeps silent.

The #MeToo movement, where women spoke against sexual violence, shows the influence of initiatives started in the West. Women from Egypt, Lebanon and India shared their experiences on social media (Eltahawy 2017); however, when specific accusations targeted Tariq Ramadan, malaise and polarisation crept in. Once the story broke, a colleague in Oxford university immediately defended him as being attacked for being a prominent Muslim (Yorke, Lawford 2017). El-Tahawi (2017) claims that Muslim women's bodies are used as proxy; she claims that Muslim women are caught between a rock – a right wing that demonises Muslim men and 'connects every single misconduct to Muslimness and Islam' – and a hard place that is a community 'too eager to defend men against all accusations.' As mentioned earlier, the discourse became so polarised that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss the issues specific to the Muslim communities. El-Tahawi (ibid) cited Aziz who reports that many women were reluctant to discuss the cases 'to not feed into the elements of the media's Islamophobic and racist framing of these allegations', adding this does 'nothing to encourage reporting sexual violence'.

This reflects the feeling of otherness among the Muslim community. Pandith (Women in the world 2016) points out that Muslims have been on the cover of magazines since 9/11, mostly in a negative sense, hence it is no surprise the discourse got to this point. Storytelling in general and films in particular, whether feminist or not, can refocus the debate on the woman/women affected by these rights' infringement.

#### *Notes for practitioners*

##### *Counter-narratives: deconstruct Islamic narration regarding women in Pre-Islamic Arabia*

It is important to draw a picture of Pre-Islamic Arabia that is accurate from a human-centric perspective. This means focusing on historical personalities that embody the degradation of women's status present in Ahmed's studies. Hate speech in far-right discourse relies on

women's depiction in Islamic scholarship to offend Muslims. They are not alone. Wafa Sultan rejects Mohamed as a moral figure quoting how he treated women, particularly Aisha whom he married at nine and Safia the Jewish woman whom he married the night he conquered and killed her father, brother and husband. These stories are based on Hadith and Syra, hence the same suggestions from the first theme apply here too. It is important to draw an accurate depiction of women in the Abbasside empire and question if these texts are a reaction to the status quo. After all, since there is no historical artefact to prove any of the pre-Omayyad narrative, it is worth asking if the marriages of the Prophet justified the Harem or is it the other way around? The target here is to dissociate the systematic rape and enslaving of women from following the Prophet model. If public opinions moved enough, this might put enough pressure on establishment Islam to ban under-age marriages and purge the Hadith describing sexual encounters with infants described by el-Qemani (September 8, 2018).

*Alternative narrative: present historical stories from local and national borders, normalise the representation of strong successful women Muslim and non-Muslim.*

Islamism is not only the responsible for women's issues. Whether the veil is a sign of faith, political signifier or an assault campaign from the far-right (the Punish a Muslim Campaign), cultural productions need to put the sophisticated diversity in Muslim women as a core principal of its representation, particularly in the West. In the Middle East, representation of successful women needs to be dissociated from traumatic events as pointed out by Azzi. She (Azzi, Tannous 2021) added that these women are depicted as if their success is a quest for revenge on a society that traumatised them. Representations need to normalise the success and achievement of women. That is by no means a call for undermining the struggle they go through or the sexism they may face. Ideally, the success of Orid Hallan need to be replicated. The film avoided hyperbole and presented its case simply and genuinely without militarism. Audience were sympathetic to the main character and her struggle to break free. Across the national borders, many issues can be challenged in both narrative and documentary. Activist filmmaking is by no means the only one promoted here; feel-good movies with positive outcomes can set a good example for young girls.

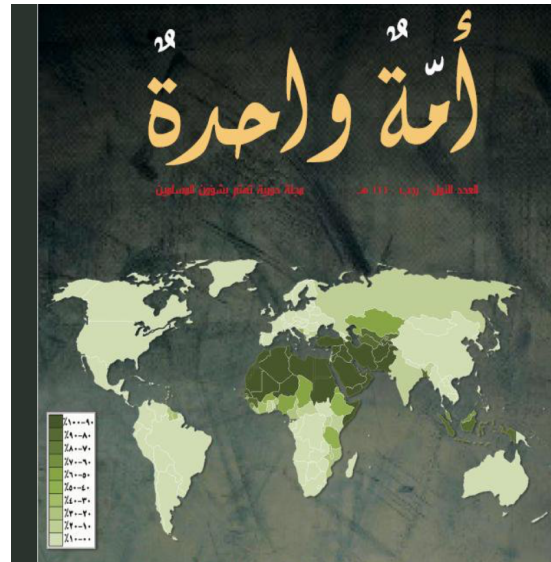
### iii. Third theme: Minorities' rights

Most material consumed by extremists contained no direct reference to violence but 'instead promoted an identified group of people above others and used derogatory language and references to undermine outsiders in distinctly malign ways, without explicitly suggesting they should be targeted or harmed' (Holbrook 2017:14). Material within this category included some of the output from radical preachers and scholars such as Anwar al-Awlaki, Sayyid Qutb [founder of Muslim Brotherhood], the Australian cleric Feiz Mohammed, and Jamaican-born convert Abdullah Faisal, who authored extremist content too (ibid).

Extremists target minorities in their violent attacks. ISIS drove the Yazidi Iraqi community to near extinction. The community has a reputation of devil worshippers which makes them an easier target to justify for extremists (Jalabi 2014). It is worth noting that targeted minorities also include Muslims such as Shia, Ahmadi, Alawi etc. Since Sufis are accused of worshipping idols, this community is particularly targeted (a deadly attack of 235 worshipers in Sinai [BBC 2017]). Upon the rise of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, Sufi's worship places were destroyed among all the other Kaabas leaving only the one holy place known today (Daring Question 2007e; 2017n). It is worth noting that establishment Islam claims the right to identify who is Muslim and who is not (Ahmed 2011). For example, according to Fatwa 5419 (2000) it is a crime for an Ahmadi to "call himself Muslim, to call his religion Islam, to call for a prayer by using the Azan or to refer to his place of worship as mosque." Dar el-Fatwa in goes further by threatening Muslims who joins Ahmadis by apostasy (Fatwa13503 2017).

Abdel-Samad (2016) claims that Islam posits itself as a single identity source. This is not an attribute to Islam alone in the political discourse, as Arabism did the same. However, little to no distinction was drawn between 'Arabness, Islam, Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism' as Salameh (Twitter 28 June 2019) points out while commenting on the 1937 speech of Druze Prince Chakib Erselen in the Great Mosque of Aleppo.

In this context, it is worth noting the map to the right. Jihadoscope (Twitter 5 April 2019) shared the new magazine of Al-Qaeda Ummah Wa7ida [One Ummah]. The editorial states their belief that ‘our Islamic nation is one nation despite the difference in regions, languages and colours’ and succeeding in this unification is a jurisprudence obligation. They advocate for the brotherhood underpinning this union due to the Quranic scriptures and Hadith, and politically they claim it is beneficial to unite under one Imam and one political system.



Picture 10 Al-Qaeda new magazine cover featuring a map of the one nation

In this highlighted area in the map, various ethnic, religious or ethno-religious minorities live who either do not identify as Arabs (Yazidis, Kurds, Maronites, Copts, Amazighs etc) or are not Muslim (Christians: Maronites, Orthodox -Greek, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Caledonian etc and Catholic; Jews, Yazidis, Mandaean etc).

This issue is considered to benefit Israel who wants to seek discord and fragment the Arabo-Muslim world; most countries, with the exception of Lebanon, dealt with minorities as inexistent (Rabinovich March 31, 2019). Hazran (March 31, 2019) argues that it was an actual policy and strategic vision for Israel to ally itself with the league of minorities against Arabism, from attempting to establish a buffer Druze state on its borders with Syria to forming an alliance with the Maronites in Lebanon, and it was in that line of thought that they invaded the Golan and Lebanon in 1982; however, these policies have failed. This adds complication to an already complex issue. The Jewish communities paid a heavy price for the creation of Israel since they were kicked out of their homes in Iraq, Egypt and Algeria (Box of Islam 2016g). They also feature in most conspiracy theories and fighting them is an eschatological requirement for the end of days. MEMRI has an anti-Semitic project that documents all the negative discourse around the Jews in Arabic-speaking media. The efficiency of this method is questionable.

RAN advises that portraying voices from the community will stop the dehumanisation (Radicalisation Awareness Network 2018). MEMRI's angle up to now has been to pinpoint racism in the Arabic media discourse, without any representation of the community.

It is worth noting that some voices in communities reject the status of minorities, like the Amazigh in Morocco and Algeria and the Copts in Egypt, deeming themselves the indigenous people of Land before the Arabic colonisation. The colonial aspect of Islamo-Arabic narrative is taught in school curriculums. Frank Salameh (March 31, 2019: 3'00) comments on the 'fin de race' as defined lamentably by Arabism scholar Kamal Salibi as the

destruction of near Eastern Christendom [...] the deliberate methodical dispossession and the outright erasure of the histories, languages, cultures and memories of the indigenous non-Muslim Middle Easterners is a saga 14 century in the making yet normative Middle East studies, Middle East scholarship, and legacy Middle Eastern punditry praised themselves often for identifying the same usual suspects namely economic hardship and a vexing Arab-Israeli conflict that rankles even the weary...

Furthermore, non-Sunni Muslims complained about being excluded from this Arabism that seemed like a Sunni movement (Rabinovich 2019). Michel Aflak of the Baath party helped to create a secular version of Arabist ideology (ibid). Saghiyeh (2014) states that minority identities were mocked in Arabists' circles of the 1960s and claims that the creation of ISIS is a humbling symptom of a region in crisis with modernity. The next day Khoury (2014 cited Salameh 2015 :21) responded saying

Concerning the 'other's' affront to Arabism, it is perhaps worth remembering that the onus here is not the Phoenician, Pharaonic, Mesopotamian, or even Kurdish and Berber civilisations, as my esteemed colleague suggests; they, after all, are not the one who trespassed on the Arabs. It is in fact the Arabs, themselves and Arabism in particular, that affronted and abused all those who were not Arab. No need to remind anyone here of the ethics and (less than becoming) conduct of Arabists in the heyday of Arab nationalism. Indeed, Arabism was to a large extent the ISIS of its day. Arabism and its hollow strident acoustics was the only acceptable benchmark of selfhood in those times; if one dared disclaim his imputed Arabness, he was deemed a traitor (instead of, say, an infidel today), and his reward would have been the gallows (instead of, say, meeting the sword today).

Each indigenous community has specific aspirations; however, their respective histories showcase the process of Arabisation. 'A Berber is someone who did not attend school' (Maddy-Weitzman March 31, 2019) means that a person was not subjected to the Arabisation process of education. Hence it should be an immense win to have the Moroccan state recognise Tamazigh as an official language and have it taught in schools; however, the state still refuses to register children with Amazigh names (ibid). The Kurdish community is an example of a community that rejects Arabism; they were targeted by Saddam Hussein's Baathi regime who bombed the city of Kirkuk with gas, killing thousands and forcing the survivors out of their villages (Daring Question 2016c; Box of Islam 2018g). The Kurdish case is special since the Iraqi Kurds aim to establish an independent state. However, the Syrian Kurds did not communicate separatist tendencies, but instead established a local pluralistic government in Rojava, North Syria.

Perhaps the most outrageous crime against humanity in modern times is the Yazidis' enslavement. Working with them, Miara (March 31, 2019) describes a loss of identity and a complete confusion of how to identify. Despite being living in Iraq for centuries, the Yazidis are still not present in the educational curriculum according to al-Tamimi (The Muslim Woman 2017) and it is the Iraqi government, and not them, who holds the deeds to their land (Miara March 31, 2019).

Salameh (March 31, 2019) argues that Near-Eastern communities acted 'as cultural intermediaries – a hyphen' to preserve the philosophy and to translate it between East and West – and prompted the scientific progress in the Abbasid era. Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2016e) attributes the progress in Baghdad and Cordoba to the diverse environment and the cultural investment of different communities. However, the mainstream narrative claims that progress is due to Islam (ibid). However, Islamic and Arabist myth is not based on historical evidence. According to O'Shaughnessy (2004) effective propaganda is the synthesis and manipulation of symbolism, rhetoric and myth. He argues that

propaganda rejects intellectual challenge, and it seeks refuge in the structure of myths. Old myths can be re-created, but new myths can also be invented [...]. Myths are a culture's self- explanation, and they are a key part of propaganda (stereotype, for example, is a kind of myth) (O'Shaughnessy, 2004: 4 & 65 cited Schmid 2014:2).

Islamism and Arabism are not the only ones creating the myths. Minorities may have weaved victimhood (Copts) or resistance (Maronites, Kurds) in their own myths. This section reproduced scholarships and discourse from the minorities' standing point. The aim from that is to sense the disgruntled feelings underpinning it. If multiplicity in personal identity construct has shielded youth from extremist recruitment (Nafees 2018) then pluralism is a value to promote as an antidote for the single identity construct, especially since it has an inherent value as part of the history and the myth of the area. From this perspective Islamists' and Arabists' myths can be countered by the historical myths of the indigenous communities. However, Andrius (Box of Islam 2019f) asserts that Orientalism is mainstream in academic circles. Needless to say, the study of the inner clash of civilisation in the East Mediterranean and North Africa cannot be understood in its full scope from an Orientalist angle that promotes homogeneity of an Arab identity, especially if voices from the communities reject it as an oppressive colonialist identity.

*Notes for practitioners*

*The aim here is to promote human rights and assert diversity as an inherent cultural value by enabling minorities to tell their own version of historical events and put forward their eclipsed cultures as alternative narrative.*

*Counter-narratives: deconstruct the invasion and subjugation narrative, address grievances.*

In its current format, the theoretical discussion attempted to hint at the fundamentalism present in the discourse of minorities. Instead of challenging it, this research advocates understanding the underlying frustrations and putting their grievances central to the discussion and representation. Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2017) touched upon the grievances of Byzantine Christians with the Roman Churches; this is an angle and perspective to historical narrative that requires some attention, particularly around the fall of Constantinople and the Crusades. Furthermore, the current narrative of establishment Islam and the one taught in schools claim that there was a foreign Arab-Muslim army that invaded the Levant and North Africa subjugated and enslaved its indigenous population. This is similar to the ethnic replacement if not cleansing of the Native Americans or the Maori in New Zealand. However, while the sentiment of resentment may be similar, Middle Eastern history may have been viewed with a retrospective distortion (Taleb 2014). Holland (2015) suggests a peaceful transfer of power to the Umayyads, and the emerging DNA studies suggest a story of conversion instead of replacement. If proven true, feasibility studies can determine if an online mapping project instead of video-essay or documentaries can have a positive effect on establishing family ties

from different regions, denominations and religions. This can challenge if not refute the single identity or replacement narrative. While there might be hope for a more peaceful historical narrative, it is by no means an invitation to neglect hardships or even massacres that are forgotten in the collective memory.

Moreover, the Islamic narrative attributes progress to Islam in Andalusia and Baghdad, while in truth the responsibility lies with pluralism and the cultural exchange caused by migration (Box of Islam 2016e). The contributors to the progress were from mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds: Christians (translations by Syriac monks), Jews, Persians etc. Recognising minorities' contributions to this historical progress is one of many necessary steps to address the sentiment of erasure very present in the quoted literature. Reversing their marginalisation in the narrative may be a long and complicated process; however, placing diversity central to the narrative is starting point.

*Alternative narrative: normalise diversity representation; celebrate the contributions of minorities to cultural of national heritage,*

Political Islamist parties succeeded in clouding correct definitions in the public discourse (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). Assid (Box of Islam 2018b) pinpoints that secularity is organically achieved in communities before Islam. This is an example where local histories and narratives can be an asset in redefining national identity. As already discussed, many minorities reject this hegemony in identity definition as Arabic post-colonial. Hence, Orientalism as a theoretical lens for representation needs further attention.

National identity is defined as the product of sameness within the national borders and differences with others. Across the Middle East, closer attention needs to be given to the myths produced by minorities as an asset for national identity construct. This is an example of a Coptic myth: During the Fatimid era, a Coptic priest won a debate over a Rabbi. Offended, the Rabbi manipulated the Caliph to ask Christians to assert their beliefs by moving a mountain as indicated in the Bible. The Virgin Mary guided the priest in a dream to a devout man who performed the miracle in question and saved the Christians. The religious aspect of the narrative may divert from the victimhood woven into this community's narrative to the point that it attributes its survival in their homeland to a divine intervention. Yet it does not mask the problematic relationships between minorities, particularly the Jewish community that is cast as a provocateur.



This research cannot give recommendations relevant to communities in each country. What it can assert is targets and values for minorities' representation that practitioners need to adopt for their local community and production infrastructure. Future representation needs to normalise minorities' representation in a way that avoids the stereotypical images already produced in the national sphere.

#### Content creators: cultural practitioners and academics

The cultural practitioners meant herein are directors, writers and producers who are in a better position to produce the alternative narrative. Sanaa Azzi (Azzi, Tannous 2021) suggested that producers can be lobbied to adopt the recommendations of this framework in their commissioned content for mainstream media organisations. Since the reliance on their role in producing content for media consumption is self-explanatory, this section will focus on discussing the role of engaged scholarship and impact of academia.

#### Engaged scholarship and the role of academia

An increasing number of academic literatures are reflecting on academia's crisis of relevance. This crisis is reflected in the study conducted by the Pew Research Centre published in 2015. It noted an alarming difference between the views held by scientists and those of the public (Hoffman 2016b). Furthermore, the economist (2010) wondered if America's universities would face the same fate as the Big three American automaker companies in 'facing the cataclysmic change around them and failing to react.' One of the problems may simply be that academics might not see the benefits of allowing participants from the public to influence their decision-making in deliberative meetings (Hoffman 2016a).

However, the causes of this crisis go beyond the academics' refusal to engage in public and political debate to the academic culture of 'brick-making', meaning 'producing specialised pieces of knowledge without integrating them into a cohesive whole that could fully explain the corpus of their inquiry' (Hoffman 2016a:77).

However, the engaged scholar (Van de Ven 2007) lacks training in engaging the public and political discourse. Hoffman (2016a) structures the pressure on academics around three domains: pressures for change, signals of change and the urgency of change.

The first pressure force is the state of public debate, where there is a disconnect between scientists' stance and the public (ibid). This disconnect is explained by motivated reasoning (Kahan 2010) and political partisanship (Mcright, Dunlap 2011). It threatens the efficiency of academics and scientific communities in explaining the state and the gravity of scientific findings (Hoffman 2016a). The second pressure force is the new context of the academic environment in which social media is democratising knowledge, and where universities must learn to engage in the new realities of the information age. Scholars write in academic journals and consider it a contribution to the public debate without knowing that no one reads them (Hoffman 2016a). Moreover, pseudo-scientific journals are changing the landscape (Kolata 2013). Hence, insisting on writing solely in journals means relegating academic publications 'further to the obscurity of the side-lines' (Hoffman 2016a: 81). Strauss (2013) professed lack of appreciation for the value that the academy provides to society within state legislatures. Hofstadter (1962: 33) noted that academics are viewed as an elite class of people who are studying issues that are 'beyond the reach of the ordinary man's scrutiny, but who can, and often do, determine his fate; through a disproportionate influence on the political process, often at the expense of the taxpaying public.' Nevertheless, Konkel (2015) notes that scholars are beginning to engage in public and political discourse despite the fact that they are often not trained or given the proper incentives to do so. This engagement depends on school or department and career stage, with younger faculty expressing more interest in engagement and in using social media to do it (Hoffman 2016a). Calling for academics' public engagement is an urgent return to the core purpose of higher education (Checkoway 2013) or the scientific social contract as advocated by Jane Lubchenco (2015). Hoffman (2016a: 82) argues that academics are obliged to provide 'a service for the community, to give value for money they provide in public funding, government grants or general tuition and an account of what that money is being used for'

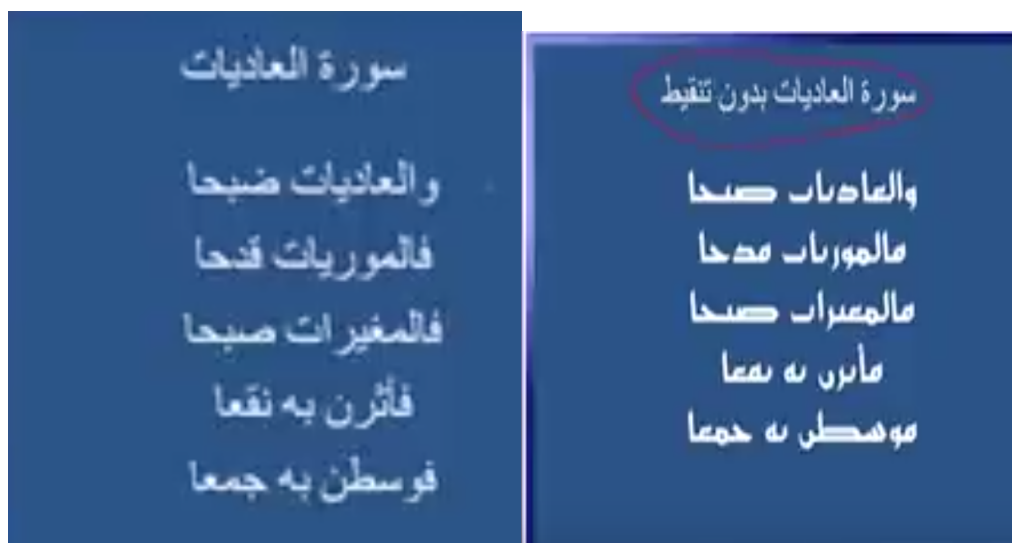
#### *Notes for practitioners*

This research embraces more involvement from academia in public and political discourse as theorised above. Academics can fill the gap in promoting the critical thinking necessary for counter-narratives. Needless to say, they can conduct theoretical research looking into the theoretical gaps identified earlier. Furthermore, this involvement can solve some of the problems identified in the discussion with the practitioners. For example, Asmar (2021) touched on the errors on the misrepresentation in costume dramas, while Azzi (Azzi, Tannous 2021) stated that instead of spending on five documentaries consumed only by elite, the focus should

be on producing engaging dramas. Representation studies is already present in film scholarship; a closer attention can be given to practice experimentation.

Video-essays are one of many possibilities of publications that can democratise or increase the reach of academic publications to a wider audience. As stated earlier, this framework entrusts academic research and engaged scholars in producing the counter-narratives and communicating them to a wider audience. El-Messayeh (Box of Islam 2017n) notes the audience's thirst for academic knowledge on Islamic history and attributes the wide acceptance of *Box of Islam* episodes to discussing data without disrespecting Islamic heritage. It is worth noting that researching Islamic history faces limitations. Sawma (Daring Question 2012c) calls on Dr Piun to release the earliest Quranic parchments retrieved from Yemen so other scholars can study them. However, these parchments contradicted the Islamic narrative and were retracted by the Yemeni government according to Abdel-Samad (Box of Islam 2015v).

To highlight the importance and the necessity of academic research that challenges the monopoly of establishment Islam over scriptures, this is an example from a research conducted by Younes (Daring Question 2013y).



Picture 11 On the Left, the current version interpreted as the horses going to war. On the right, Younes' research where the poem speaks of [possibly] nuns lighting fire and bringing it to the congregation.

Younes acknowledges that the Quran was written with undotted letters; he redistributes the dots on letters from a Meccan Sura. Commonly the meaning describes a war scene however his reading describes women (possibly nuns) bringing light to a gathered congregation (Daring Question 2013y).

The output of this angle can include video-essays exploring representation or sharing academic research as well as documentaries or feature films. These suggestions are not an alien concept to academia. *Lamma Hekyet Mariam* (Fouladkar 2001) is a commercially-released feature film which relied on the infrastructures and personnel of a film school. Academic institutions possess production infrastructure and professional personnel to enable individual practice research or creative partnerships. Film schools aggregate the right environment for the creative risk-taking necessary for bold initiatives, like developing critical cinema such as women's cinema as proposed by Johnson (2000) or treating social complex issues absent from mainstream cinematic representation like minorities and the other themes as proposed in this research's framework. Academic institutions are in a privileged position to produce documentaries for general audience consumption – like *Fronteira da Grandeza* produced by Combat films and research of the David M. Kennedy Center for international Studies – or to negotiate collaboration with mainstream media outlets – like the Open University productions with BBC.

However, there is an added problem to those listed above relating to Orientalism. Given his research interests, Antonius (Box of Islam 2019f) recounts a friendly warning to beware of Orientalists, as it is the mainstream theoretical framework that is aggressive towards challengers. Orientalism seems to play into the victimhood discourse of Islamism; however, their discourse marries victimhood with supremacy (Abdel-Saamad 2016f).

Khatib (2007:65) claims that studies of Islam in Western cinema often relied on Orientalism as a theoretical basis where the undeveloped/inferior Orient is opposite to the developed/superior West. She points to problems in these studies such as the preference to an abstraction of the Orient rather than a depiction based on evidence. Furthermore, since the Orient cannot define itself the Western vocabulary is scientifically objective, and lastly the Orient is depicted as something to be feared or controlled (Khatib Halliday (1995 cited Khatib 2007: 214) calls this tendency 'Eastoxification where myths are reproduced uncritically about the region in the name of anti-imperialism'. He (ibid) argues that the Orient contributes to the othering and that it is a manifestation of the power struggle within the East. Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019b) disputes that there is an Arab World or a Muslim World, yet these are common words that anchors most of the research case studies, even in Khatib's article that contrasted the issue.

It is worth noting that the research institutions that are studying topics related to all three themes are based in the West. Expatriate academics or those with roots and links to Levantine and North African countries have a very important role to play. They can tackle issues more directly than home based researchers or academics if they are present in a safer environment. This explains the research's stance in calling for more engagement from the West in solving world problems. This section draws on the necessity of public policy, and while engaged scholarship can fill a certain gap it is not a substitute for a culture policy. However, academics can influence policy makers; hence what follows draws on the necessity to take this influence into consideration in future research and publications.

Abdel-Samad (2016) draws an analogy between Islamism, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Nazi party; the analogy includes their role as the single provider of identity, the feelings of defeat at the root of their beginnings and the attempted balance between the victimhood and supremacy. This analogy is one of the reasons to draw lessons from the German anti-Nazi purge. Recognising the danger of the philosophy in Germany, Japan and Italy, President Roosevelt requested their total surrender to the Allied Forces in World War II (Taylor 2011). To purge Nazi Germany, the Allies dismantled the governmental institutions in Germany and forced an election, which is also what the American-led coalition implemented after defeating the Baathist regime in Iraq (ibid). However, after the US army withdrawal, ISIS was born; they established their state in Syria and erased borders separating Syria and Iraq. Abdel-Samad (2016) argues that Germany was reborn by owning up to an ideology that is no longer acceptable and rising above its past, while the Muslim world still holds dear a worldview that cannot be compatible with the modern world. After its defeat in World War II, Germany purged hate speech from its curriculum (Rodden 2001) and invested in culture initiatives like the Jewish Museum. This museum stands witness to the genocide committed against the Jewish community but at the same time it educates about certain aspect unique to Jewish culture.

Despite that the German experience might be a guideline to follow in countries struggling with extremism, it is highly unlikely that such steps can be forced on a sovereign state. Al-Tamimi (The Muslim Woman 2017) claims despite surviving ISIS, there is still 'not one page on the Yazidis (Êzîdis) in the Iraqi curricula. Furthermore, most schools' curricula praise Arabo-Islamic colonisation over the history of the indigenous communities (el-Qemani September 8, 2019).

This research seems to espouse Levy's (2019) call for more involvement from the West in solving global problems, even on a cultural level. Even if the philosophical underpinnings add to the gravitas of the argument, the call for more involvement of Western academic institutions is purely practical, since the willingness of Middle Eastern states to target this issue with cultural or educational policies seems unlikely in the short term. While these states are forthcoming in establishing secularity (Box of Islam 2019a; 2019h), Assid (Daring Question 2015ah) attributes the struggle to modernise Middle Eastern states to four reasons dictatorships, petrodollars and the Wahhabi influence, political Islam and Palestine.

*(1) Dictatorships - army coups:*

Can Dünbar (2016) describes power relations in Turkey as 'a pendulum from barracks to Mosques'. This description is applicable across the Middle East. Assid (Daring Question 2015ah) argues that in order to compensate for the lack of democratic elections, rising dictatorship always allied themselves with religious institutions to gain legitimacy.

In Egypt, the Socialist coup of Abdel Nasser advocated a Pan-Arab national identity. Political Islam, although popular, was pushed out and members of Muslim Brotherhood were persecuted, arrested and tortured in jails; some of them were exiled to Saudi Arabia. This is not specific to Egypt. The political activist Albert Kilo (Elsharq 2017) recounts that a guard in a Syrian prison ordered him to tell a very young child a story. When he attempted to narrate a story about a bird, he was interrupted by the child who had never seen one. Kilo explains that the child was probably was born in the cell to a mother who is 'probably the daughter of a Muslim Brother' and that she was held there without a trial to lure her family back to Syria.

Although Sadat is the one associated with the rise of Islamism in Egypt, Radwan (Daring Question 2017k) claims that Abdel Nasser played a massive role in empowering Islamist agenda by making el-Azhar a university and a partner of the Egyptian judiciary system. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) supported President Sisi's coup to oust the Muslim Brotherhood rule, but he later expressed his disappointment in the era.

The Syrian Baath regime, allegedly secular, is viewed as an Alawi dictatorship (Rabinovich 2019). It reinforced the grip of religious preachers on Syrian society (Daring Question 2013aa) as did Saddam Hussein in Iraq (Annahar 2014 cited Ibrahim 2015). Jean Pierre Filiu argues that security

agencies preserved the 'Arab deep state' at a price of helping to create a 'monster [...] in its most extreme form the jihadist of the Islamic State (ISIS)' (Black 2015)

Coptic Nationalism, a blog founded in 2011, aims to 'revive the culture of our [Coptic] nation'. The stated aim for the blog or the movement is to work for a civilian, secular and a democratic Egypt for all its citizens. That entails casting out political Islam from the politics in Egypt, as 'Islamism cannot coexist with democracy, fraternity, equality and liberty in any country' (Boles 2014). Eventually, though not immediately, it also means the replacement of the military rule by a purely civilian one. 'This will have to wait until the Islamists are sufficiently weakened' (ibid). That political voice from a minority prefers a dictatorship than Islamism after hopes faded for a democracy in 2011 since 'Islamism and the military are the only two competing powers' (ibid). Naturally, the statement also required guaranteeing the individual (civil and political) rights of the Copts.

## *(2) Petro-dollar and the Wahhabi influence*

The discovery of oil in Arabia was one of the biggest factors in spreading the Islamic resurgence. Assid (Daring Question 2015ah) claims that the absence of a civilisation plan led the newly rich state to export backwardness. This controversial statement is due to the massive Saudi investments in opening Islamic schools worldwide that teach the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam abided by in the Kingdom. Leila Ahmed (2011) noted the role of the Saudi money in building new mosques and schools in Egypt after the return of the exiled Brothers from Saudi Arabia under Anwar el Sadat.

Hamid Toufic (Daring Question 2011; 2011i) stresses that the Islamic resurgence worldwide success was only made possible after the organisational skills of the Muslim Brotherhood united with the unlimited Wahhabi funds during their exile in Saudi Arabia. Khalil (Daring Question 2016j) claims that the consequences are seen in the Netherlands and Germany without forgetting North Africa and the Middle East. In America, CAIR (Council for American Islamic Relations) oversees these schools. After the attacks on the Twin Towers, the curriculum of these schools was put under scrutiny and they were required to remove hate speeches. After complying with the government's recommendation, a review published in the New York Times stated that they still advocated a world divided into two groups: believers and non-believers. Believers referred to those of the Muslim faith and the unbelievers are all other people; this

would mean that non-believers would not have same rights in a Muslim country or the love of Allah in the afterlife (Abdel-Samad 2016h).

### *(3) Political Islam:*

It is worth noting that many of the interpretations present in the counter narratives belong to Islamic Renaissance scholars like Mohamed Abdo, el-Afghani and el-Kawakebi, Assid (Daring Question 2015ah) points out that they acknowledged the Western leadership in the fields of science, logic, freedom, architecture and the organisation of a state. However political Islam, and mainly the Muslim Brotherhood and its influence in el-Azhar sabotaged these efforts (ibid).

In 1928, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslim Brotherhood was formed with the goal of re-establishing the Islamic Caliphate (Daring Question 2011; 2011i; Box of Islam 2016c). The founder of the Brotherhood, Mohamed el-Banna, is an el-Azhar graduate and scholar; he based his ideas on the teachings of Ibn Taymiya, a scholar who lived in 13<sup>th</sup> century Baghdad (Abdel Samad 2016c). It is the main ideological school from which all the Jihadi groups were derived, including Jama'a Islam-I, al-Qaeda leading to the birth of ISIS (Trager 2017; Abdel-Samad 2016; Box of Islam 2016c; El-Hadad 2017; Daring Question 2015a). The Muslim Brotherhood contrasted the good East vs. evil West, advocating their moral superiority over the promiscuous West, and the necessity to fight till the good – Islam – wins.

### *(4) Palestine*

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is in the heart of most political debates in the area. The suffering of the Palestinians is featured in the first speech given by bin Laden (Glazzard 2017). Most Islamist groups claim a victim's status. They complain about the West's hostility towards the Muslim World, particularly America with its support of Israel. Zionism is in the heart of most conspiracy theories and the de-facto go to reason for all the problems of the Middle East. Comparing the outrage expressed for the sufferings of Palestinians v. Kurds, Abdel-Samad (2016) points out a double standard in the reactions of the public, stating that the victim is not the one who rallies sympathy but a tailored anger towards the criminal. El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) states on the Palestinian cause 'we are fighting for the mosque, if we were fighting for the land people would have understood us.'

It is worth mentioning that the defeat in the wars with Israel has created a mass-disillusion that was harnessed by Islamists and particularly the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. El-Qemani



(September 8, 2018) recounts that upon Egypt declaring defeat in el-Nakssa, the war lead by Abdel-Nasser, the head of Muslim Brotherhood performed an Islamic prayer thanking God for the victory of the believers/Jews over the non-believers/communists. This enabled the Brethren to advance their slogan: Islam is the solution, which gained momentum following the masses' disillusion with socialist ideals (Ahmed 2011).

#### Marriage of convenience: The role of moderate religious institutions

El-Azhar is an embodiment of Ahmed's definition of 'establishment Islam' that judges other readings of Islam – or sects – as 'heretical'. For example, Ahmadis are infidels according to Fatwa 5419 (2000) but the institution refuses to extend the courtesy to ISIS (Kol Yom 2017b, 2016b). It interprets the Hadith and the Quran as 'ascertainable in a precise and absolute sense' (Ahmed 1992: 238). The institution has a great impact on Egyptians' lives: it issued 520,000 fatwas in 2014, educates 400,000 students in its university and three to four million students in its schools (without counting its schools outside the Egyptian borders) (Daring Question 2015g; 2017k). Although it is a moderate institution, the list of its graduates includes Ayman el-Zawahiri, Sayyid Qutb and Abdallah Azzam (founder of modern concept Jihad) (ibid). El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) accused el-Azhar of be being a terrorist organisation. This is mainly due to the thesis presented by Abdallah Azzam that is argued to be the blueprint for al-Qaeda (Daring Question 2017h)

One of the main problems is that governments rely on religious institutions to give them legitimacy as they are not relying on a mandate given by a democratic vote (Daring Question 2015ah). In the case of el-Azhar, a fatwa calling someone a Kaffir (or infidel), is a Hokem or juridical verdict (Daring Question 2013a) upon which the life of the person becomes less than the life of a Muslim. Therefore, assassinating one does not solicit capital punishment. In recent history, the el-Azhar apostasy fatwa led to an attack on Taha Hussein, following his book *Fil Che'r el Jahili* (1926). The book questioned the reliability of Arabic poems' sources and by extension the Quran; Hussein had to retract his book. The fatwa against Faraje Foda led to his assassination and his killer was even defended by El-Ghazali, a sheikh from el-Azhar and a Muslim Brother (Ahmed 2011). Egypt recognises Islam as the religion of the state, and still has clause in its laws that prevents disrespecting religions. Under this clause, el-Azhar recently managed to prosecute and jail Islam el-Bihiri, a TV host who calls to address the violence in the Hadith that is taught by

el-Azhar as well as fine Fatma Naout for her tweet on *Adha* (Daring Question 2016f). Moderate religious institutions are responsible for teaching curriculums not just in Muslim countries but also in the West. The curriculum of Islamic schools came under fire in the UK and the US (Bennet, Sylvester 2017) for teaching wife beating. In Egypt el-Azhar's curriculum came under fire in the Egyptian media and the purge they conducted was deemed inefficient by their critics (Kol Yom 2017a; 2017b).

El-Qemani (September 8, 2018) claims that it is futile to count on the Muslim majority governments to solve the extremism problem as they are benefiting from it. Rabboudi (Box of Islam 2019b) claims that in the Middle East states are still under construction, suffering from an identity crisis, and that the population are showcasing an unwillingness to live together. Political Islam is thriving under these conditions since they present themselves as the solution without having to put forward real solutions to the problems. The states are using political Islam to justify their dictatorships. Even in the case of Syria, the ISIS stronghold, the protests started to demand basic rights of freedom and dignity (Sinjab 2013). To silence them, Assad had to mobilise the Alawi community as under threat from Islamists (Rabinovich 2019).

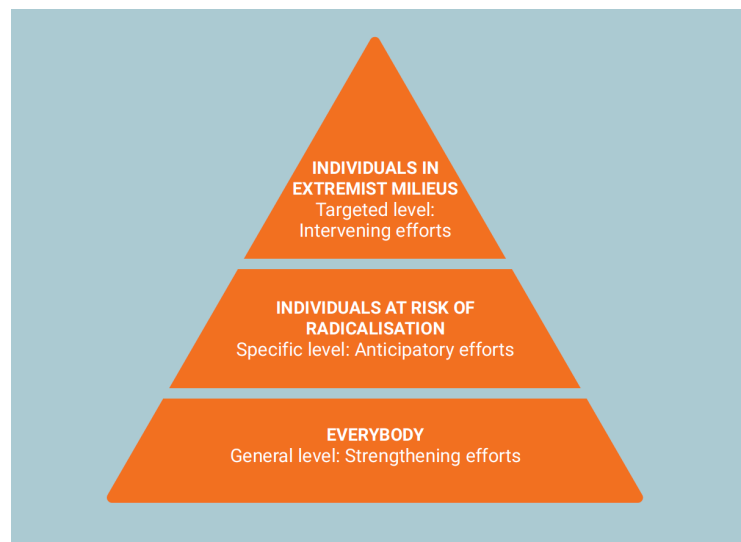
This framework is developed to fill some of the void created by the lack of governmental policies that tackle extremism on the cultural level. The policy followed in Egypt is to silence them completely and control the media discourse (Azzi, Tannous 2021).

## Section 2: Distribution

This section discusses the people this framework hopes to reach and how to reach them: the target audience and the medium.

### Target audience

The target for this framework is a general audience. If desired, defining the age group for each project is consistent with the standard practice adopted by producers for film productions. Cultural productions are not just mere responses to propaganda; they espouse ideals of activist filmmaking. However, they can still benefit from governmental strategies determining targets for counter-narratives. The Danish government drafted a national plan to counter and prevent violent extremism in 2016; it is increasingly framed in the Prevention Pyramid, pictured below. It lists target groups and corresponding efforts (Hemmingsen, Castro 2017: 13).



*Figure 4. Danish Pyramid of target groups and intervention level*

This research targets the category in bottom of the pyramid in Figure 5 branded “Everybody.” Strengthening the resilience of the general public can be successful by combining elements from counter [as in aggressive attacks or deconstruction] and alternative [as in promoting values] narratives in order to challenge the extremist worldview that aims to alienate Muslim communities from others. Using popular culture and storytelling allows us to discuss difficult issues such as extremism without alienating moderate Muslims. In this way we can ‘avert the risks of making the problem appear bigger than it actually is’, and the subtlety of content can also avert ‘raising the curiosity of the recipients and pushing them to seek extremist material’ (Hemmingsen, Castro 2017: 28).

#### Platform: Mainstream and Online media

The three counter-narratives’ frameworks reviewed earlier claim that the space of deradicalization in online (Ashour 2010) and limits the role of media to accurately report the news (Van Ginkel 2015). The framework for cultural productions as counter-narratives developed in this thesis contradicts that completely. The model built for practitioners regards mainstream media and online distribution as equally important. It is certainly preferable to have a distribution strategy that targets both. Mainstream media will increase the products’ audience share and might increase any project’s visibility on online platforms. However, access to broadcasters might not be available to many producers or director (Asmar 2021).

Each project stemming from this framework is a unique case. Practitioners will develop their own distribution strategy according to their budget. However, when choosing an online platform for their products, practitioners are advised to heed Tannous' (Azzi, Tannous 2021) advice to carefully consider the user experience on that platform and avoid the ones that will overwhelm their viewers with ad content. He also advised to devise online ad campaigns engaging influencers to promote the product or to highlight a specific character. While there is more online distribution platforms, Azzi and Tannous (2021) pointed out to the importance of Netflix and its impact on the mainstream Arabic speaking media.

#### Sustainability of the proposed framework: managing risks

One of the advices to counter-narratives' practitioners is to go for measurable results while building a sustainable campaign (RAN 2018; Counter-narratives.org). This research argued for a cultural change aggregated by cultural goods. This change is difficult to measure and prove. However, audience responses to individual projects can be assessed and can inform future content creation.

##### *Risk management: Deflecting investment and consumption risk*

The possibilities of cultural productions stemming from this framework are endless and range from fiction films and documentaries to art installation or theatre etc. However, it is essential to make creatives' involvement in these issues attractive and enabling creative risk. For that the funding bodies can adopt selection criteria that prioritise issues identified by this research and support producers in shouldering investment risks.

Since the Second World War, American movies dominated the market. In 1918 Charles Pathé (cited Sojcher 2011) came to the conclusion that whoever dominates the American market for film production and distribution will dominate the global cinema market because the USA offered a viewers' market bigger than all industrialised countries. In the light of lessons learned from the Nazi experience, relying of Hollywood productions alone is problematic considering the simplification of the representation (Mann 2003; Khatib 2006b) and the necessity of treating extremism as a problem within Muslim communities (Khatib 2006b).

This can be problematic due to the monopoly of the Hollywood distribution and the challenge it poses to local cinema. Tannous (Azzi, Tannous 2021) highlighted the importance of giant media

organisations and the impact they might have on addressing the issue. Hence it is important to understand their business model. Hollywood's profit model is similar to book publishing, music recording and pharmaceutical manufacturing, meaning only a handful of product generates significant profit and half of the productions are moderately profitable (Pokorny, Sedgewick 2012). The blockbuster was essential to Hollywood's survival after the World War II as to differentiate its outputs from television. Despite the increasing level of risk with higher budgets, their obvious attraction is the possibility of a single film generating very high profits (ibid). Since the 1960s, suburban multiplex cinemas were developed to sustain the movie-going culture, and Hollywood's survival increasingly requires developing sophisticated strategies for maximising film revenues (ibid). This allowed more movies to be released simultaneously; to benefit lower-budget movies, blockbusters were released on several screens simultaneously, making the bulk of their turnover in the first weeks (Wall Street Journal 1998 cited Stoller 2019). Online streaming offered possibilities for producers to reach audiences worldwide. Azzi (Azzi, Tannous 2021) asserts that commissioners require their content to be 'Netflixable'. Stoller (2019) argues that Netflix is centralising distribution and production; their strategy now is to cancel shows that subscribers like in order to avoid paying its creators and subtly raising the prices of their subscription knowing it will be tolerated. Stoller (2019) adds that 'Netflix is a money loser [...due to] taking inputs and combining them into something of less value [...] the company doesn't sell content. The company is selling a story to Wall Street, that, like Amazon, it will achieve dominant market power.' Even if this the case Stoller (ibid) argues that legislative power can restore open market.

However, the products stemming from this framework would be more likely products of independent cinema. This section discusses the risks that practitioners need to be aware of while developing their content. Mann's (2003) critique of the easily dismissed Hollywood movies is due mainly to the formulaic Hollywood narrative. Bordwell and Thompson (2007) claims there are five principles crucial to Hollywood's narrative: (1) a goal-oriented story means it is 'driven by the character's effort to attain goals'; (2) a double plotline has to have one of them at least as a heterosexual romantic love; (3) a discrete part structure that is built around four parts: the setup, the complication, the development and finally the climax; (4) planting causes for future effect where 'every scene has unresolved issues that demand settling further along' and (5) deadlines referred to by screenwriters as "the ticking clock" or the time pressure which can be present at any point but is 'mandatory at the climax.' Independent producers are freer in their stories, but that makes them more popular in aficionados' circles (UK Film Council 2007).

However, independent producers rely on different set of strategies to lower risks, like adaptation or securing content from other media to provide an acceptable familiarity with the story as a risk-reducing technique (von Rimscha 2009). Common practices among independent producers to raise funds can be summarised in four points. First, securing a letter of intent from bankable stars is not legally binding, however, it is more appealing for investors. Employing a star is a risk-reducing technique since a star acts as a control agent of quality, but it means a higher budget which raises the amount of potential loss (ibid). Second, profit sharing contracts are utilised, in which the risk is transferred to the personnel where they accept deferring their fees till profit is being generated. Third, contracting a sales agency is an ideal scenario to secure a pre-buy exploitation right at the development stage (ibid). Besides the cash flow, it secures a powerful adviser against marketing *faux pas* since consumption risks are usually managed down the line. Vertically integrated corporations (production-distribution) are usually the ones who benefit from addressing consumption risk at the development stage (ibid) Finally, a completion bond is meant to reduce production risks and ensure that project is complete in time and to budget. It ensures solely the investor or funding body's interest since if cashed, the producer loses all rights to the project and his/her reputation (ibid).

It is worth noting that consumption risks are higher when targeting Islamic subjects. For example, when *Islam the Untold Story* was aired on Channel 4 in the UK, Ofcom received more than a thousand complaints huge number of complaints (O'Carroll 2012; Sweeney 2012). Besides the threats to Tom Holland's safety, Channel 4 cancelled the scheduled repeat (ibid). This example shows the high risk of consumption hence producers have to rely on public funds. Receiving them is a risk-transferring technique, given that the producer is aligned with the public body's selection and funding politics (Sojcher 2011), but that usually means abdicating economic objectives. Nevertheless, producers are expected to point out why 'the proposed movie package is likely to result in a successful movie' (von Rimscha, 2009: 83). This is why it is important that these different funds support shouldering the various risks undertaken by practitioners when their cultural products are aimed to challenge cognitive extremism. Needless to say, governmental funds are a European peculiarity. This explains why this research nods at the important role that expatriates can play in conducting their own productions or forming co-productions with practitioners in their homeland. There are lessons to be learned from small nation cinema, particularly Danish cinema, when it comes to developing cultural policies that support the production of cultural goods while enabling the creative risks.

### *Lessons from small nation cinema*

A small nation obtains this title if the size of its population is too small to sustain a commercial film production, if the language spoken makes it difficult to expand the market through export and international distribution, and finally if its productions struggle due to the influx and dominant presence of American films (Hjort 2005a, Hjort 2005b). Denmark outgrew its small nation status and got the attribute of a medium size. This growth is due to a specific condition that created the right environment and to the major influence of Lars von Trier (Hjort, Petrie 2007). His Dogme 95 manifesto validated the idea that a low budget movie is not something to fear.

The Danish government played a major role in supporting this environment. It implemented a plan to finance a one-hour film for emerging talents and succeeded in limiting the risk of a first film. It then increased support from '50/50 to 60/40' making it easier for producers to finance the rest of their films (Hjort 2007: 31). The New Danish Cinema was created to support the artists in their creative process as a 'strategic countermove to the inherent risk of inertia quickly setting in [in] any form of government' (Redvall 2012: 213) in order to ensure future success for Danish films. With their involvement in the creative process, a commissioner is no longer a gatekeeper but an 'organisational representative who conducts an initiative to enhance creativity' (Stradvad cited Redval 2012: 216).

However, in this context, funds that support international productions like Fonds Sud Cinéma and Europe's Neighbours are of great importance. Les Fonds Sud Cinéma, one of the funds of the French Centre National du cinema (CNC), supported more than '500 films from Asia, Africa, Latin America, Near and Middle East since 1997' (CNC Website). Most importantly as mentioned earlier, it supported artistic initiatives otherwise overlooked in the national cinema, like topics of war in Lebanon and FGM and fundamentalism in Egypt (*Dunia* and *Al-Massir*). Their assessment technique to justify their funding is interesting. It is not centred around the commercial success of their movies but assesses the economic and social impact of the monies spent by the CNC (Bout, Salles 2013:9). It is worth noting that media professionals in the Middle East criticise the CNC selection policy as Orientalist (Azzi, Tannous 2021). This selection can be updated to take into consideration the positive impact it may have on the audience in recipient countries of these funds.

Access to European funds or any governmental funds may not be an option for many filmmakers. This underpins the recommendations of this research for engaged scholarship to fill the gap already discussed earlier.

#### The difference from other frameworks

The counter-narratives frameworks developed by Ashour, Van Ginkle and Tuck and Silverman were built to support the creation of ad campaigns centred around messengers delivering direct messages to a fringe audience. The difference between them and this framework for cultural productions is obvious once their approach to content and target audience are considered. Only one of the frameworks reviewed in this thesis addressed the content. The handbook by Tuck and Silverman is the foundation for the toolkit available on [counter-narratives.org](http://counter-narratives.org). However, their advice on creating engaging content claims it can be

a wide-range of different tones. It could be; reflective, antagonistic, scholarly, mournful, regretful, cool, exciting, adventurous, provocative, humorous, or satirical. It can tell a personal story, seek to directly engage an ideology or one component of an ideology. It can feature real-life people, such as former extremists and survivors of extremism, in an engaging documentary-style. It can involve cartoons and created characters; or fictionalised dramas or scenarios (Tuck, Silverman 2016:20).

The framework presented in this thesis is set to define the themes needed in the dramatisation of identity related content suggested in Ferguson's research. In order to take control of the narrative, it advises practitioners not to respond to extremists' narrative but to produce content in the identified areas where the debate can be refocused on the human experience. It is not concerned with movies who wants to represent the military aspect of fighting extremism. These movies may be important in order to resist the tendency for collective amnesia that a society might strive for after a trauma. However, these movies need to refrain from committing the same mistake of Nazi movies and have to be more than 'just movies' (Mann 2003). Also, for those who are interested in direct interaction with people vulnerable to extremism narrative, theatre work may yield better results and may benefit from referring to work by Odd Arts in the UK or Lucien Bou Rejeili, particularly his work with fighters from different camps from Tripoli. This is aimed at practitioners who use film aesthetics and production structure to tell their stories.



## 6.0 Conclusion:

This thesis set to define the identity-related content that can have a positive impact on violent extremism. It showed how cultural productions can embody the aims of counter and alternative narratives as defined in violent extremism literature. Hence, it presented a framework for thematic content that can challenge cognitive extremism in the cultural sphere, as well as a model for practitioners to support their decision making and define their product in the development phase. It is devised with Levantine and North African creators in mind (both residents and expatriates) for their future use.

Since cultural productions aim to fulfil the role set for counter-narratives, the research adopted their guidelines of combining offensive and defensive techniques where a counter-narrative deconstructs, and an alternative narrative promotes (Reed, Ingram et al. 2017). It was imperative to identify if specific themes were needed for this content, and most importantly to define a language that can articulate it to bypass cognitive resistance. The textual analysis of YouTube videos of skin-in-the-game cultural practitioners identified three themes: historical narratives, women's status and minorities rights. Aimed to practitioners, the research was designed as practice-led. Hence, a series of seven video-essays studied representation in popular culture to inform the development of the framework. This process, aided by the discussion with practitioners, enabled the creation of a working model that guides practitioners to define their product as counter or alternative narrative based on their research, storytelling strength and interest as well as the considerations they have to keep in mind throughout the development phase.

European governments believed counter-narratives will counter extremists' recruitment (Glazzard 2017). However, a growing body of literature is claiming they are inefficient (Glazzard 2017; Nafees 2018) and even counterproductive to their target audience (Bélanger, Nisa et. al 2020). This research built a model based on a growing body of evidence that suggests the positive impact of identity related content (Ferguson 2016). The model presented here showcased the necessity to look beyond the violence or behavioural extremism and challenge the worldview common between violent extremists and non-violent Islamists. Many of those

who embraced violence were initially influenced by non-violent extremists (Schmid 2014b). Violence may be the *modus operandi* of extremist Islamic parties, but that does not mean they envision a nation's political construct differently than the confederate established by the Prophet (el-Qemani September 8, 2018). With political Islamic parties sharing the same worldview, they have the ability to affect the social structure and the nature of relationship between Muslims and other communities (Ahmed 2011; Box of Islam 2019f). The Muslim Brotherhood is argued to have laid the foundation for Islamism. The Brotherhood was 'spectacularly victorious' in Islamising Egypt due to their non-violent methods favouring the route of education (Ahmed 2011). An Islamist journalist summarised the 'common understanding of Islam's inevitable advance' in the following words:

Islam will spread through the neighbourhoods, and then to Egyptian society as a whole, and then to the Egyptian state, and then to other Muslim countries, and then to countries in which Muslims were formerly the rulers, and then to other parts of the world, including Europe and the United States. (Ahmed 2011: 154)

To address cognitive extremism, this research's framework advocates a human-centric approach to storytelling and built its recommendation to normalise representations of modern-day values of equality, human rights and diversity. In practical terms, the counter-narrative aspect of this framework, delivered primarily via video-essays and documentaries, targets the transnational narrative of Islamism. This is the offensive approach aforementioned against the transnational narrative. It aims to challenge the concept of Islamic *Ummah*, the Caliphate and the misinformation about Pre-Islamic Arabia and early Islam. More importantly it deconstructs the single identity component that Islamists promote (Abdel-Samad 2016), making a multiplicity of identity construct possible among their targets. The 'intellectual vanguard have long recognised its obligation in the face of a universal emergency' (Mann 2003: 173). Hence, academics are best placed to deliver this angle with the factual deconstruction of historical narratives' inaccuracies. Academics already conduct the foundation research needed for this angle. Engaged scholarship advocates an increased involvement of academics in the political and media discourse. Needless to say, this research espouses these values and calls on an increased role of academia in promoting critical thinking and actively seeking to increase its positive impact on the society at large. Furthermore, practice researchers have a huge role to play in communicating their research in engaging ways to larger audiences. This research advocates video-essays as a way to communicate data and accepts Mann's (2003:181) assessment that the documentary style

'proves so successful [...] may well be compatible with the bold artistic approach.' If academics outputs embrace video-essay and documentaries, it will clear the path for cultural practitioners to focus on drama production and produce content that normalise empowered women, the LGBTQ community and minorities. Azzi (Azzi, Tannous 2021) suggested the incentive is poor for producers to produce documentaries due to a limited audience share of an intellectual elite and a low consumption from a general audience. However, these documentaries can play a great role in influencing the media discourse. It is worth noting that these suggestions are not meant to deter academics from producing dramas or cultural practitioners from producing documentaries or videos.

Consequently, the alternative narrative promotes local identity as a component for the personal identity construct and places diversity and pluralism as an intrinsic value to the society or community in question. This approach is very local. Considering the difference in history, minorities and women's rights, this research cannot extrapolate a uniform production model that can work efficiently in different countries of the Middle East. However, it presented cultural practitioners with a working model that can support their storytelling development. In a nutshell, it advises producers, directors or storytellers to set an aim they like to promote or counter. They can then develop the story to embody it indirectly without lecturing the audience. A cast of stars can help increase the reception of this approach. *Philadelphia* and *Orid Hallan* are both examples of letting the story be the message needed to win public opinions.

This research's approach plays directly to the role of media in shaping personal and national identity, where they act as distributors of ideology, enabling the imagination of the community and the nation (Dzeimidock 2003; Gitlin 1980; Anderson 1991). National theory is selected herein to limit cognitive resistance.

The implications of this research can reach policy makers and film funding bodies. For countries struggling with extremism, it lays the foundation work for future development of local cultural policies that take into consideration local narratives and cinematic productions' infrastructures. The parallel between Islamism and Nazism (Abdel-Samad 2016) gives a working model for what local governments need to implement in terms of cultural and educational policies. Educational curricula can become more inclusive of different communities, their culture, histories and narratives. This is precisely relevant to the indigenous minorities of the Middle East. Similarly to educational policies, cultural policies can reflect the diversity of the local history and culture:

initiate museums to document the atrocities endured by the victim of extremism as well as present their culture, as seen in Germany's Jewish Museum, and create funds to support research and cultural initiatives as in theatre and films that represent marginalised communities.

Film funding bodies, precisely those who fund international films co-productions, can rethink their funding policies to consider the impact of these productions on the community or nation represented by the films. Their selection can take into consideration prioritising productions stemming from this research's framework to support its aim and increase its impact. Naturally, funds can help producers shoulder the financial risks which may increase the number of participants.

The practice model developed for cultural productions as counter-narratives contradicts the established model for counter-narratives. The framework of this research takes radical steps away from the three different counter-narratives' frameworks. Ashour, Van Ginkel and Tuck and Silverman advised practitioners to create ad campaigns as a product. However, in this model, ad campaigns are just a promotional tool for the products of the cultural productions' framework. It is worth noting that Bélanger et.al (2020) pointed to a palpable efficiency to political messaging in ad campaigns. However, if this suggestion is aimed to change minds, it is worth remembering that election campaigns are based on political messaging and fail to change minds on social media (Chan 2020; Hanft 2012). Cultural producers interviewed for this research agreed on the inefficiency of campaigns to change minds, with Tannous (Azzi, Tannous 2021) highlighting that campaigns driven by influencers can work to promote a cultural product.

Additionally, this framework laid the foundation to address cognitive extremism. Hence, the violence is no longer central to its counter-narratives' discourse since they bypass the *modus operandi* to address Islamists' ultimate goal of establishing the Caliphate. Hence the importance of a messenger experiencing and contributing to violence is dramatically diminished in this approach. This indirect approach to storytelling and focusing the discourse on the lived experience of the character can focus the discourse on the issue tackled by the production.

Unfortunately, this research could not take a particular country's production infrastructure into account in its risk assessment section. If some sort of financial support was available, its practice could have explored more in-depth the difference in counter and alternative language in each

theme. Video-essays would have higher production values and better quality. This lack of funds deterred from further researching the Abbasid era contemporary to the writing of the Hadith's books identified as missing from the discourse since a visual exploration in video-essays was unaffordable.

While discussing the framework, I identified gap in the discourse. Naturally, further research is needed. While my angle is practice-based research to track impact and audience reception, it is by no means the only one possible. With regards to the Abbasid era, it is worth exploring what impact it had on the depiction of early Islam and the Prophet? Will discussing the socio-political environment of the era impact the audience perception of early Islam? How will that impact the discourse of establishment Islam? To date, establishment Islam defended the rigour of the methodology followed by the Hadith collectors. It is worth noting that the lack of historical evidence supporting the narrative of early Islam, precisely the one of the first Islamic Caliphate, is not discussed on mainstream media in Muslim majority countries. More importantly, the narrative of an Arab-Islamic invasion lacks the historical evidence (Holland 2012). Deconstructing this myth can affect discourse of establishment Islam and minorities. Also, it can impact the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. These are a few samples of the potential research enquiry this framework can instigate. It is worth noting that when there is an Islamic historical artefact it should be placed central to the research inquiry. Making the findings of the research of the seventh-century Quranic manuscript public can have an impact on the discourse and audience as well. Balancing the research outputs between showing historical evidence when available and pinpointing lack of evidence when it is the case is preferable. As repeatedly said in this framework and the work it inspires should celebrate and respect Islamic heritage.

Unfortunately, the threat of violent extremism is not over yet, so this enquiry might still be possible. Despite the fact that ISIS is losing ground, they released three videos of groups from Sinai, West and East Africa pledging allegiance to them (Jihadoscope Twitter 23 June 2019). Some jihadists joined the Hazimi group which is more extremist than ISIS (NL Times 2020). So finally, for practitioners who were wondering what can we do to fight extremism? This is your starting point and best of luck.

## 7.0 Appendix

### 7.1 List of films featured in the video essays

Films that defined the perception of early Islam in the public psyche

*El-Shayma' (Mazhar 1972)*

El Shyama' is the sister of the prophet, she is the daughter of the woman who breastfed him which is considered a sibling's bond in Arabia. She is married to a man who hates him and conspire against him with Quraich. Her avid support for her brother puts a strain on her marriage. Throughout the movie she challenges him and her tribe to not fight Mohamed and protects him against the kill order issued by Mohamed. The film is historically inaccurate.

*El-Rissala (Akkad 1977)*

The film recounts the stories of early Islam from the view point of the prophet. This was el-Akad's way to go around the ban of representing the prophet of Islam instead of relying on third person narration. It is worth noting that this film has a seal of approval from both Sunni (el-Azhar in Egypt) and Shia (Majeliss el Shii el a3la in Lebanon) authorities and despite that it was banned from release in Egypt. It was filmed in Arabic starring Abdallah Ghayeth and in English starring Anthony MacQueen (Massrawi 21 9 2017). The director claims his film was seen by American soldiers Post 9/11 to understand Islam (Al-Mouji 2017).

*Hijrat el-Rassoul (Amara 1964)*

Hijra is the migration of the Prophet from Mecca to Yatherib and the start of the Hijri year. The film focuses on slave stories who converted despite their masters' will. Although the characters are fictional the film did not roam free from the shackles of the main story (Kassem 2011). Commonly, Mohamed is believed to have freed the slaves and established equality. However, although some slaves might have been freed as a political statement (Daring Question 2010c; 2010d), scriptures regulating slavery is reproduced in the Quran (el-Qemani September 8, 2018)

Films that represented extremists/ fundamentalists

*El-Irahab wal Kabab (Arafa 1992)*

Ahmed is frustrated by bureaucracy in his attempts to change his son's school. The government employees were not helpful or professional, particularly the fundamentalist. In an unlucky twist of events, Ahmed got in a fist fight with the fundamentalist and disarmed a security officer to find himself an accidental terrorist holding hostages. A call girl and a cleaner joined his cause. Not having demands from the government, he ordered lunch for his hostages, kebab and kofta. He leaves the building aided by his hostages.

*Al-Massir (Chahine 2000)*

Abdallah, the Caliph's son wants to become a dancer, Marwan and his wife grew attached to him. Exploiting his differences with his father, radical extremists target Abdallah to recruit him in order to assassinate the Caliph. Averroes was made aware of the extremists' threat. A fundamentalist judge is baiting Averroes drawing a wedge between him and the Caliph to thwart his efforts to uproot the extremists. While the extremists' plot against the government failed, their plot against Averroes succeeded and he was sent to exile after attending the burning of his books. Nevertheless, his allies succeeded to smuggled copies of his books out of the country, but only one copy made it to Egypt to be preserved.

*Touyour el-Zalam (Arafa 1995)*

3 old communists friends' life choices are contrasted in this movie. Mohsen kept true to his communist ideals but poor. Fathi, pursued financial gain through enabling political corruption and becoming the office of a corrupt minister. Ali's easy money road led to defend Islamists and mixed up in their terrorist activities.

*Hello America (Galal & Zakri 2000)*

In the sequel to Bekhit and Adila, the couple travel to America. The films depict them in a series of situations where cultural differences are highlighted.

*Al-Irhabi (Jalal 1994):*

After failing in his assassination mission, the Salafi terrorist Mostafa got hit by a car. Mistaking his identity for a Philosophy lecturer, Sawsan and her left leaning family insisted on hosting him till he fully recovers. Mostafa falls in love with Sawsan. He learns that her target is her uncle. Once his true identity was discovered, he returns to tell Sawsan and her family that he did not kill her uncle. However, an extremist assassinates him and he dies on their doorstep.

Films that represented minorities

*Janat el Chayatin (Fawzi 2000)*

The film is an adaptation of a Brazilian novel by Georgio Amado. Tabel died of an overdose and his body was delivered to his family to receive his final rites. Tabel had walked away from his rich life to live with delinquents and marginalised people. His friends stole his body and the film follows their last goodbye trip together.

*Amir el Zalam (Imam 2002)*

Saïd is one of the heroes of the October war, he was blinded in the war. Rejecting to accept his disability, he walks around pretending he can see and protects the youngsters in the shelter

from a cruel director. An assassin infiltrated Egypt to kill a foreign diplomat and choose the shelter as a base for his operation. Naturally, Saïd steps in to save the day. It is worth noting that the film was a huge commercial success and argued for disability rights

*Bahib Issima (Fawzi 2004)*

Naïm falls in love with cinema. Adli, his fundamentalist Coptic father forbids him from watching movies.

Films that are funded by the French funds.

The inclusion of these movies was due to their artistic expression and their treatment of difficult topics particularly *Dunia*.

*Dunia (Saab 2004)*

Dunia wants to become a professional dancer. In her admission interview to a dance school, she stands still and recite poetry claiming that a woman cannot move her body or evoke an act of love if society requires her to hide her femininity. This is one of the rare movies that addressed Female genital mutilation.

*Whatever Lola wants (Ayoush 2008)*

An American woman falls in love with an Egyptian man and followed him to Egypt, he rejects her since when in Egypt he needs to abide by Egyptian values. She tracks Asmahan, a former dancer who retired following a scandal and eventually, convinces her to teach her to belly dance. The relationship between the 2 women sparks Asmahan's healing process.

Additionally, other films were included in order to illustrate the point that the essay

*Imara'a wahida la takfi (Degheidi 1990)*

A corrupt journalist is involved in a love triangle between a poor woman he is supporting, a feminist and a rich lady who is advancing his career. Although irrelevant to the plot, the film portrayed an education that is heavily shaped by Islamists.

*Singing in the rain (Gene, Donan 1952)*

The classical Hollywood movie that depicts the shift from the silent era to the talkies. The choice of this particular movies is due to its dream ballet in order to illustrate the theories it inspired in academic literature.

*Sabah (Nadda 2005)*

The film portrays a conservative Syrian family living in Canada. Sabah falls in love and her relationship triggers her family's road to fully integrate into the the Canadian way of life.



## 7.2 Interviews with practitioners

Nabil Asmar: In house director MBC

Greetings and so on

Nabil: I didn't quite catch what is required from me

Nagham: Ok let me tell you why we are discussing political Islam and extremism now. I started my PhD in 2015, it is coming to an end this is why I asked you for your contribution. We will be discussing my media strategy and thinking together as media practitioners, media outlets and what type of content we need to produce

Nabil: interesting

Nagham: we are going to have this discussion because you know your audience, you work in one of the biggest channels with a considerable if not the biggest regional audience share, you have been working long enough (laughs) to know the audience, what they want and you are politically aware and active from what I see from your Facebook posts. So, this is why I value your input on the topic

Nabil: Thank you

Nagham: Before briefing you on the work done, let me ask you what do you think we should do? How do you perceive the work?

Nabil: we should do in the business?

Nagham: yes. To counter the narrative of extremism like ISIS, like Hezbollah, like political Islam or whatever, what do you think we can do?

Nabil: this is not my field, I used to cover a lot of political gatherings and stuff but for the time being I am doing daily shows and bulletins of 30 minutes, but I am not...

Nagham: Apologies I forgot to say, you don't have to respond in English by the way, I can do the translations later. Whatever language you are comfortable with, it's fine with me

Nabil: I prefer English or French

Nagham: both are fine

Nabil: I do not interfere in the content; I follow what is going on and of course I have a vision of what needs to be done. Already, what's being done is not a small deal, especially in big stations like Al-Arabia and Al-Hadath [News channels] and now Bloomberg, MBC. Foreign news

organisation Euro news, CNN. Their role, well there is 2 folds. Certainly, they have their politics, their alignments and they have their funders and certainly they have a content that goes parallel to their advertisement and the turnover of the station. After all this is what TV does, it is not a charity, it will be ruined if it did not bring revenues. For example, Tele Lumiere aims to spread a Christian content purely, they are against advertising, they are funded by individuals, if these people aged and passed on, their children will not pursue the funding. Their funding does not seek commercial gain this is why it is a weak channel. I am not saying that good content is a funded content, no, good content is a product of intellect. But to get people to make that content with intellect. At first intellect costs money, to get an intellectual to do this content to invest in people... to invest in a mixer or a camera is way easier than to invest in a brain.

Nagham: true

Nabil: Now, in the Arab world there are loads of Brains [as in intellectuals] I work with them on a daily basis; however, these brains are politicised, and they adhere to the stations in their political agendas. We cannot compare the Brain power here with those of Europe. The difference between news media between the East and the West: The West is pure information, here we have loads of *langue de bois*, meaning receptions and goodbyes, this is an aspect and it has an audience. The second aspect of those Brains who do political content, if our conversation will look jut into politics and war, these are the best, the best journalists. Unfortunately, in Lebanon if we want to separate Lebanese media from Arab media, unfortunately this is media that lacks objectivity, unfortunately it is not credible. They are intellectuals beyond belief, learned and avid readers, they all graduated from the UL, they are all on the same level, I am not going to get into the naming game, unfortunately the well-established are not credible. It is impossible as a journalist to have dinner with a politician tonight and tomorrow you have him as a guest in your panel. As a journalist it is forbidden to be their friend. If we compare our media with European media. Those who make the politics programming or the news in France, Patrick Poivre d'Arvor and Clair Chazal, when they host a politician they are objective and transparent, they don't hang out with them, they don't have dinner with them and they are not their bodies, because this will cost their credibility. A journalist without credibility is not a journalist. This is if we are addressing the part of the politicised journalist. A politicised journalist can exist if committed, meaning if I am a journalist for al-Massira magazine, I am a journalist for the Lebanese Forces (LF), I write for the LF, I have my politics but I am clear that this my angle, I write from this group's perspective. I am addressing my local journalism. If we are talking about Arab media from the big channels I mentioned, the journalists working in these stations have to

respect its politics but believe me it is coming from conviction. Nobody does a report against ISIS or any terrorist group or political Islam or Muslim Brotherhood without conviction. It is true they are working in politicised stations. In counterparts the journalists of Al-Jazira who are starting to tame the discourse with other GCC stations but for a while they were focused on criticism Al-Arabia and Al-Hadath and other stations who spoke against Qatar.

Nagham: yeah

Nabil: so, what these stations are doing is around the clock coverage of everything that is happening in the world, in the Arab world and the terrorism and those... what they are called... the extreme groups

Nagham: yes, got you conservative groups and fundamentalist/ extremists

Nabil: yes, they are giving 24/7 information. On the other hand and in parallel and this is why I am a bit... because we are from the pure TV generation before digital was introduced... on the other hand, every station without exception, every station has a segment or a programme that reports on what's going on social media. Certainly, there are people who studied and planned to make this strategy, to integrate the world of digital with the TV, but is this something good or dangerous? Every station now has its own digital account, every programme has its own digital account, the social media account, ok do you want to attract viewership, or do you want to alert them that your content is available in summary on their phones? Certainly, I don't have the answer, it's with those who devise strategies. The creators of these platforms are intelligent, and it is now a paid platform to watch content that has sponsorship, but this is something, if we want it or not, is dangerous to TV. Now, if we put good content on a TV station or a radio station or on a digital platform, whether it was in a super expensive set or on a cheap chair on a sidewalk in Dawra, it is content. Now how it is received by the viewers? Which is more impactful? I haven't conducted studies on it, but it is very possible that the content made on this chair in Dawra's sidewalk will be more viewed than the content made in a setup for 100 of thousands of dollars. This is why I always say, the big headline, content, content and then content. Without content, we have nothing regardless of technologies, without content we have no TV material.

Nagham: I think you hit the nail on the head in some issues, especially in information, we have a big issue in reporting... [interviews interrupted by a phone call]

Nabil: where were we?

Nagham: We were talking about information, counter-narratives as it is conceived now, they are saying that the media role is to give information. There's a study that claimed dramatization of identity related content will have a positive impact on violent extremism. So in these years, I scouted the Arab speaking media, without getting in to the Arab identity and so on, to identify the type of content that we - as entertainers, cultural practitioners, those of us who are not journalists- can do to challenge the foundation of the worldview that extremists or political Islam use to recruit from us and kills us with our own ideas or values, does that make sense to you?

Nabil: yes

Nagham: so, I identified 3 big themes that we need to discuss and produce content about. You may find them very obvious when you hear them: historical narrative...

Nabil: yes, this is a point we'll talk about, yes

Nagham: rights specially women rights and those of minorities. So, everything circles back on the idea of identity. This is all relate to media being promoters of...

Nabil: wait I can't hear you, the call is bad

Nagham: I am trying to say, this all culminate of how media, films, cultural practitioners and maybe theory will culminate in creating the identity of the public, how can we redefine our identity when needed. So, you tell me, how does that sound to you? Logical, outstretched, obvious...

Nabil: Ok this is closer to my expertise, which is not politics.

Nagham: this is my perspective as a cultural theorist not as a political expert. The thing is, it is argued that Political Islam changes the relationship between Muslims and their social environment so this where culture products can have a positive impact. You should be the one talking not me

Nabil: on the contrary I need your input to know how I can benefit you. Ok. I do a variety of programmes, I do morning shows, weekly show, football shows, and talk shows. I used to do music entertainment shows and I stopped and live coverage and so on. I do not claim that I am a storyteller or narrative, but this is my business, this is what I follow, what I read about, and I watch a lot of, and... can you hear me?

Nagham: yes

Nabil: after years and years in TV, and years in ALBA and years of exchange with experts, at the end I learned, I made sitcoms and dramas and short movies. I am not talking from a theoretical perspective, I have practical experience

Nagham: I know

Nabil: let's start with the historical, today the crime that is happening in the drama, especially Lebanese drama, is when they produce costume drama. This is the hardest type of drama. Why? Époque drama retells history, when you are dealing with history if you don't have a historian, an expert research, the results is like you said earlier, is a lie. If you are speaking on a certain era, let's say the farmers' revolution. The farmers' revolution, Claudia Marchalian wrote the script, they built a castle in a village somewhere and got their sewing machines to incorporate as props, but Claudia Marchalian did not seek a historian to confirm what was going on in this era. In the era of the farmers' revolution and Antoun Chahine, the clergy owned all the land in Mount Lebanon, the clergy was the ruler, the series did not have one priest. She lied about history. She side-lined history. We cannot produce époque without having at least an expert historian. On the other hand, Egyptian and Syrian dramas are worked correctly in all details. I will give you some examples, I am watching Netflix a lot lately. If we are going to open parentheses Netflix, well I watch more foreign series than I watch Arabic series.

Nagham: yeah, most of us do

Nabil: Or Shahed, Shahed is evolving. The series are acquiring more cinematic language, you can see the cinematic language in each episode as if it was a feature film. I will give you an example, Pablo Escobar, they got experts to create how people were dressed in the 80s, the cars, the furniture and the colours, how Pablo Escobar walked and how he combed his hair. Why? Because when you are working on époque, it is not a docu-drama, but if you don't have the document, if you haven't researched how they lived in the era you are doing it wrong, if you can't do époque than do contemporary. What exists today is easy to know. An example I watched from Egypt, Gand hotel secret of the Nile, besides the historian, in the end credits they have furniture makers they recreated the furniture of the hotel in the 40s. *Khatat* to write the office of director, this is content. This is content. If you give the viewers wrong information, first half of them are not stupid they will laugh at you, and the other half if they are not intellectuals you are fooling them, and you are giving them bad information. This is the content, this is the writer, this is the vision of the director and the producer who need to know who to get on his

team. If you got Nicole Saba to do a historical series, she has Botox. In the 40s there was no cosmetic surgeries. This is content not just an image.

Nagham: there's another problem. Sorry did I interrupt you?

Nabil: NO no I was trying to remember the 3 topic you asked me about

Nagham: let's keep discussing historical narratives since we started pinpointing problems. There are a disaster in documentaries as well, I will give you an example from Qatar, I know the Qatar TV quite well since I worked there, it epitomises some problems we might find. A friend of mine was doing a degree in UCL in Qatar foundation so they oversaw some archaeological digs, he was telling me that the documentary produced by the local TV claimed that the civilisation uncovered civilisation is 10000 years old when the land geologically was 8000 years old. So not just the lack of experts in representation, the information it relays is problematic

Nabil: well the danger is that it is a documentary [Interviews interrupted]

Nagham: Moreover, when it comes to the films that I looked at, those films who shaped our perception of early Islam. This perception enables our acceptance of political Islam's project and the Caliphate. There is no historical evidence to prove it. So, this is a problem. We have a problem as professionals as in how we produce... and... we have a problem in history that is not quite accurate

Nabil: that is the important thing. Everyone gives his own perspective of history. You cannot make mistakes in history, especially in documentaries, it is called documentary, document, it is derived from document. This either happened or did not. This is a problem. Everywhere. One might make a documentary on John Kennedy, and someone else will do another documentary from another point of view, there might be difference of opinions. Lebanon's history in schools ended in 1923. In schools they do not study what happened in 1975 till today

Nagham: it ends in 1943

Nabil: oh God yes 1943, sorry yes. It ends on the independence from the French Mandate. There's nothing else. So, if you want to divide that, in the East what did Bachir el-Gemayil do and in Hamra what did Yasser Arafat do and Mostafa Saad in Saida, you cannot divide history locally, you have to talk about the state

Nagham: well maybe we have to approach history more locally. Lebanon has an identity crisis. There are different worldviews, they are clashing and the diagnosis for the problems it suffered is not quite right.

Nabil: we got to a very important topic; it is identity. I always fought for it. At the end I surrendered. When I got employed, when I decided to get employed, if I gave my opinion my salary will be the same paid on the 27<sup>th</sup> and if I did not give my opinion my salary will be the same paid on the 27<sup>th</sup> so why should I get into this, if people follow a certain politics and they have the green light after all I am just an employee. But I cannot stop debating with people with similar education, intellectual and practical level on such issues. We have a show, if the viewership fell then change the set, it didn't work, change the graphics it didn't work, get a nice girl to do some games in the show, the show lost its identity. Télématin is 30 years old, it is still the same. Good morning America is 30 years old; it is still the same. Good morning England, Britain, you have a morning show that is still the same for 30 years. Why? Because it is identity. The viewers....you do not have to keep changing things around. Why the most successful entertainment show in the last years was Star Academy? Because it was the same. The same jingle for 10 years, 10 seasons it stays the same. The dances are the same, the surprise in the prime set is the same. The nomination on Tuesday is the same. Enough! Identity! Stop changing. The viewers are happy, it is not necessary to change everything. The voice stayed the same since its inception. These big formatted shows stay the same. You get someone who wants to feel smart and starts messing things about. Bro leave things be. It is called identity, character, it is the way it is. It is successful this way. A falafel sandwich is not grilled, if it was it won't be falafel anymore. You cannot make the shawarma Mac Donald. You cannot make it combo. You cannot cut the meat with an electric knife. It not shawarma if the chef is not hot with a towel placed on here [points to his shoulder]. I am not comparing programmes to shawarma; I am saying identity is relevant everywhere. There are things to which we create Bibles. Why is it called Bible? Every programme has a Bible, the book is that thick, why is it called Bible?

Nagham: I s...

Nabil: Because the Bible does not change. It is written by the apostles and does not change. This is why it is called Bible for you to stop messing with it. This is my answer to the identity. I live that everyday

Nagham: I a...

Nabil: Producers younger than me, they are young now in their 30s, the content producers, the TV has changed. Now, you have producers, they are called producers despite that they are in fact line producers. In the middle of the show, he comes to me and says hey why don't we put the presenter here instead of here. What? How? Her light is there not here. Her cadre is there not here. The background is there not here. The viewers will find it odd; they are used to her in that environment do not change it. This is what is making people flee to social media. This is putting the TV in danger and causing loss of viewership.

Nagham: The TV industry....

Nabil: we were doing a cooking show, you go ahead

Nagham: I disagree that social media is a danger to TV because the industry is surviving

Nabil: I hope so

Nagham: the quality that you or TV gives to people is very different than the one given by social media. Even in cooking, since you were talking about the topic. I am not a fan of these shows, so I go on social media, I don't want the 30 minutes video I want videos with one minute. TV content has adapted, the BBC directive in 2010 or 11 was to slow down content because they wanted to accommodate viewers looking at their phones. The rhythm did not follow social media it slowed down to accommodate people's usage of them. However, our TVs and I am not attacking any TV that posits itself as cross-regional or anything

Nabil: on the contrary

Nagham: they are aggravating the identity problem. I am all for diversity and maybe we can touch on the issue later when we talk about minorities, but these TV are not drawing multi-talents to a melting pot

Nabil: Multi-talent to a what?

Nagham: melting pot. Let's say the States, they drew immigration from everywhere and they had a culture of their own. For example, you have jazz as a cultural product that is a result of that fusion. But in the case of these cross-regional TV, it is a mish mash or a collection of different people reflecting their own culture in an allocated time share. These TV are mostly funded by the Gulf states; however, we hardly see any content from the Gulf or that promotes their culture. What do you think? Will this change or this is what we will be stuck with?



Nabil: Look there is a new generation, there are new ideas, there are new writers. There are people with new content. We have to wait and see. Already the quality is better. The language is getting better. The level is high, I am not saying it is a low quality, it is a high-level quality. The new generation does not have enough baggage to produce a heavy content. I am not generalising.

Nagham: no no

Nabil: 50-50. We have a generation that came after the tv. They came directly to digital. They immediately handled 5D and laptops they did not start with the Umatic and evolved. This is the generation that has a bit of a weakness. Maybe this generation they passed a milestone, they are digitally oriented that they have the cultural baggage. Maybe, because they had a different formation. I am not saying that social media destroyed TV. NO. I have examples in front of me I live them every day. Every day, we do a rehearsal of the titles before we start, the presenter opens her live broadcast on Insta, she gave her fans the titles, they know them already, they have the summary they left. They left. They got the short content; this is what they wanted. The sweetheart could say now we are going to do the titles watch us and cut her live feed. So, they get motivated to tune in, otherwise they got the summary and they'll go to something else.

Nagham: this is...

Nabil: a second example on cooking

Nagham: ok

Nabil: resolve this if you can. They claim that they have followers and sponsors and we have to do it, whatever, plastic generation. Another example on cooking. I do cook programs. Every recipe has its method, there is the general identity and the set and the cuts. One time she was doing Shrimp curry. It is a complicated recipe with loads of ingredients, ok? What she's doing, the best way for the viewer to see is from a top view camera

Nagham: of course

Nabil: the viewer does not care about the beauty shots; she wants to know what the cook is doing with this hard recipe. I received a phone call, why didn't you do a variety of shots, why there weren't any crane shots etc? I said it's fine. The next day, the presenter was doing crêpe au chocolat, she had a guest with her, and we sent on set the producer's daughter. I had an animated set, and who doesn't know how to do crêpe au chocolat, I did everything possible in covering the segment, from crane to movement, I had fun. The same person called me, why

today the work was very beautiful with cranes etc and yesterday there was only a ceiling cam? I answered him, I said today you'll get the answer. The curry is difficult, the woman in her house doesn't care about the crane, she wants to see the ingredients, I put my camera to show the measurements. He was silent. He said and today? I said who doesn't know how to make crêpe au chocolat? What an original recipe! Besides I have content to cover, the daughter of the producer, the guest, the balloons, I have a reason to cut. I said do you want to present content or just images? He said no, present content you are right, thank you and goodbye. And they keep asking me why people go and watch cooking on YouTube, this is why, YouTubers are using their phones' cameras and showing the food, they're not showing off their makeup, or the set lighting or crane. The viewer does not care, she doesn't care, she wants to know how to make this curry for her husband. She just wants the ingredients and their measurements. Unfortunately, this is it.

Nagham: no I agree with you, we have a problem in content, entertainment as I see it has a huge role to play and is not playing it because there is a lack of strategy from the management, there is a lack of cultural policies from most government in the area, I am yet to see one. Even Lebanon after 30 years of war, there was no cultural policy to create unity.

Nabil: yes, if you want talk about this, 100%. But we excelled in entertainment. We made formats... Technically we excelled

Nagham: technically, there was never a problem. I testify to that

Nabil: we excelled, we excelled... The content starts with the candidates, do not forget that the candidates come from 20 Arab countries, so you have this mixing. You are not watching Star Ac or The Voice France, where there is just French, the same culture. This is... no be sure that the politics of the big respected channels, they know what they are doing, they have strategies, and everything you want, sponsorship and product placement...

Nagham: this is not what I mean

Nabil: yes, the strategy exists, content you are right, our personal preferences play a big role. You cannot have the emotions from 20 nationalities, it is different, this is where we cannot compare. In my opinion we cannot compare. I can only talk about the technical aspect and we excelled in it. The content (shakes his head), we cannot say that Star Academy didn't have its own identity, or Voice, or Got talent or X Factor, these big shows they made an identity, they had an identity till a certain season, till they started messing the jury they started losing their

identity, when they messed the academy they lost the identity. Till a certain season, 5 or 6 perhaps, I think we left a mark in international TV and we made an identity.

Nagham: you think that was a good example of cultural exchange or an identity erasing endeavour? Local identity erasing?

Nabil: exchange is a bit of a difficult claim, because, because ....

Nagham: but you are putting the Egyptian with the Tunisian with the Lebanese with the Khaliji and each one is giving a song from their country

Nabil: no it did not do any exchange, because culture and tradition of each one is more closed off than the other. They claim to do exchanges, but I don't think this happened

Nagham: did we erase cultural boundaries then? Because there's no unity, you have the politics worldview that is being translated by media, the unionism under Islamism or the Arabisation or Arabic unionism. Minorities, and there are loads of them with all the problems and fundamentalism in their discourse, to a certain extent these people may feel that their culture, history and their narrative is being taken over and another one is being forced on them, and now they see their culture is being adopted by these big TV channel, most of it funded by the Gulf states. So, the resentment from the denied history is now added by the cultural appropriation. These entertainment programs are just collecting cultures and showing it one after another, since there is a lack of documentaries or any programming that present them with their history or any recognition to their contribution to culture and history. These entertainment programs might be aggravating this resentment. What do you think? Makes sense? It is a very harsh criticism but what do you think about what I just said.

Nabil: you are perfectly right. But I have to be fair to everybody

Nagham; of course, please

Nabil: Saudi Arabia was cloaked in darkness; we never knew anything about it. It turned out they have an amazing history and breath-taking landscapes, we finally started discovering it once they started opening up. Saudis are hard workers, it is a big population, so they have local working force, other than the expatriates. We will talk later about the Saudi history and how they are doing their exposure. The UAE is very young, they never claimed they had history and museums and Louvre or writers, poets or historian. UAE is younger than me, it is not 50 years old

Nagham: yes

Nabil: automatically UAE has a modern history. This is its identity, modern, new comfortable, secure. It is a very short history. The Emiratis are educated, they travel to study abroad. They have international universities. It is a well-respected population; they know they are very young. Their television promotes the malls, the sea and the entertainment, what will they show, they can't lie, they don't have it

Nagham: they are not required to lie at all

Nabil: Saudi Arabia weren't opening up, there wasn't any exposure from there. Since a year, it stopped in the era of Corona, we started to discover Saudi Arabia and there is a marathon so they can catch up, firstly so they don't rely solely on petroleum resources to survive, to find other resources and to introduce people to Saudi Arabia. It turned out to be a country with breath-taking landscapes for natural tourism, they have incredible natural resources, forests, valleys, mountains, rocks, it's amazing, it's amazing. A year back, and before that, their tv and their series and their content were handcuffed, and we know what that was. We have to see from now on, so we can get a better answer if this an image of their history or...or what you said. We can't now. We can't now. They have a plan, every day they have a press conference to say what they are planning to do. Their plan is really huge. I hope they will achieve it. From now till the end of the Corona pandemic, nearly everything is on hold. Saudi Arabia has poets, writers, musicians, singers, painters, Saudi is history, it was closed off

Nagham: concept creators like atheism too

Nabil: I work in a purely Saudi television, we have one programme called MBC in a week, it is a resume of what happened in the week, in Saudi Arabia. Besides that, the channel is pan-Arab, international, it's open. I don't think I have a defined answer in that topic

Nagham: and that's absolutely ok. We can pinpoint the problem, it's not necessarily that we have a solution

Nabil: yes. I don't know if we call it problem

Nagham: ok as well

Nabil: is it a media problem? No. what do they have in their house and in their society, it's not our job to do the...

Nagham: no no this is not what I meant... (phone interruption) go ahead

Nabil: I hope that I helped a little bit in your study, my inputs are...

Nagham: of course, they are Nabil, it's very important for me to run my framework or strategy if you prefer by practitioners. Simply, if we want to challenge extremism, yes, we need to keep working politically, but there are social and cultural problems that need addressing. This is where a coalition of cultural and media practitioners can have an impact with content on mainstream media and online platform, not just online, and of course researchers who can fill the gaps and study representation. To your point, the films that shaped our perception of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia is not similar to the historical texts.

Nabil: that is true, we have a big role and you are putting a big responsibility on us. This is my work and you are drawing my attention...it's true we have a big role to play, 100%, we have a big role to play

Nagham: In a way artists and media professionals can sense audience trends. For example, Albert Camus predicted fascism and Michael Moore with the Trump win. Do you remember *Al-Massir*?

Nabil: yes, Youssef Chahine was a visionary

Nagham: well the movie still encapsulates our struggle today. I am not attempting to put a responsibility on you, I am trying to understand if you think this makes sense how it can be supported

Nabil: I did not mean that in a negative way. You made me realise that there is something I live on daily basis, without considering important till you shed that light

Nagham: well if we like it or not, media shapes perception and representation matters. I made a video-essay to explore hoe Copts view their representation in their national cinema, and I took the most fundamentalist angle, it is an uncomfortable discussion. I had *Al-Irhabi* with Adel Imam, do you remember the movie?

Nabil: I never watched it, but I know of it

Nagham: there a Coptic woman who forbids her husband from drinking beer or watching TV, so one of the lines said by a minority member that stood out to me was: if they present this as a problem in Christianity then there is nothing wrong in Islam. This is why I said there is fundamentalism in minority discourse

Nabil: (laughing) yes of course it is present in minorities discourse

Nagham: well they might feel their history is stolen from them and they are angry or victimised. Where is minority representations in the big channels now, how do you think it can make it to entertainment or to social networks sorry programming?

Nabil: they are very marginalised, there might be one programme in a year, they are marginalised, they don't have a voice

Nagham: Copts or everybody like Amazighs etc

Nabil: all of them. Once upon a time you stumble on a documentary in al-Arabia about Copts or about another, they are marginalised

Nagham: does it looks like the Copts? Corresponds to what is known about them. Or do they keep criticising that this is not us

Nabil: I don't know. I never watch it; I am not very sure if I am honest with you

Nagham: I appreciate that. Ok How about women? Women's rights? We won't talk about gay rights because...

Nabil: you still want more rights (laughing). In my opinion these words should not exist. What does women rights mean? What is difference between women and men in the first place?

Nagham: citizenship rights...

Nabil: why not men rights?

Nagham: Citizenship rights are not fully equal yet....

Nabil: Unfortunately, yes. There is nothing

Nagham: No content that addresses that?

Nabil: no nothing. They consider that this is normal. That woman situation is normal as it is. Beware, in the UAE women have more rights than men. Here, women are very well respected. In Lebanon, they made the domestic abuse law and today L'Orient reported one was killed by her husband and he ran away

Nagham: they gutted the law when they passed it.

Nabil: what? They didn't implement it

Nagham: they gutted it, it was led by Hezbollah MP or was he from Haraket Amal, they gutted it, meaning as long as the damage is not permanent or does not leave marks, it is fine.

Nabil: I don't discuss the topic really, I reject the whole premise, for me there is no difference between a man and a woman. Why should we have women rights, it is just rights. She has rights to begin with, why this exist in history and all civilisations, why?

Nagham: I can answer that, but it'll take a while

Nabil: there is not enough content about this. I don't know if they avoid because they think women have achieved their full rights or because it is the culture. I don't know. It is common sense, what is women rights. It is the same. No, there is no content. Once a year on women's international day...or something about breast cancer. That's it, 2-3 times a year. I don't know why! If they agree with me or is it forbidden to talk about this. I don't know. We should have solved this a long time ago; we are in 2020

Nagham: well, we still have no full citizenship in many countries.

Nabil: I can't understand why. Lebanese women don't pass citizenship

Nagham: I know this is why I am saying it is not full citizenship....

Nabil: They say it is for the refugees they are not passing the law, there are 1million Palestinian with the nationality

Nagham: this is the claim, but it is not true. It is a justification. A man can pass his nationality to a Palestinian woman even if he married 4 and all their children regardless if they stayed together. See why, this is an example of many. This is why I am talking about citizenship and women rights.

Nabil: why it is not the same. I don't know. To me they are the same, and I can't understand why we are still talking about this

Nagham: we are still talking about it worldwide because the same is not the case

Nabil: yes yes worldwide

Nagham: the problems are tailored to each country, but the issue is not fully solved. So, the big question is how cultural practitioners can be supported in creating this content? In shouldering risks financial risks or how can we lobby media organisations into adopting these types of content? What do you think can work?

Nabil: of historical narrators?

Nagham: all 3, there is no specific numbers to productions in each case. All these can help, historical narratives, women status and minorities rights, something similar to *Orid Hallan* for example....

Nabil: I will tell you how. The ideal solution is to open things up. Make a competition get various talents in all these themes...you make a competition and make room for new people to enter the market. Unfortunately, you are in media and you know how it works. Every producer or production company is an agent for their own writers and actors, this is the system. I am watching now, a French series called *Call my agent* on Netflix, watch it and the answer is there. The solution is ideal. Put out an ad we are recruiting writers...

Nagham: yeah

Nabil: will they survive or will be targeted by the sharks? Because you know the system, not just here, everywhere. Since the days of Charlie Chaplin and the silent cinema the clicks exist, it is the system and we are unable to get out of it. The same writer on 6000 series with the same producer and director, it is what it is; this is the system. I am not saying we should give up. You are asking me what's the solution. For me it is launching a competition or recruitment in a competition or advertising campaign to attract new talents. This is the solution, in media as a man of media, I think this is the solution. What else? There are writers with drawers full of scrips, no one bought them. You have to tell this producer, get this writer meet him maybe he's good; for this director to meet this writer he may be good. Go beyond your circle. It is a closed circle. This is why.... take me as an example. Personally, I got employed for this reason. We were 10 directors, we monopolised the programmes of all TV channels, I reached a point where the programmes I directed cannot be made unless it is inhouse, and I couldn't pierce through the entertainment circle. They had their system and their people. I made exceptional entertainment shows; I wasn't given credit. 2 or 3 people, the well-known get the credit for entertainment. So, I said I don't need this, and I will focus on talk shows. And I got employed. When I had this opportunity, I did not turn it down. As I am telling you, there are things you can't pierce through. In my position I won't be overstepped. If there's a project, we are 3 or 4 earmarked for it, pierce through if you can. This is it, this is the solution

Nagham: I am suggesting engaged scholarship to get involved and put out some content, mainly universities that have film schools are best placed to make content and maybe it will influence mainstream media. Also, adjusting the international funds' politics of selection mainly from the



West; because there is no alternative. Mainly to stress the need to invest in cultural productions instead of ad campaigns that don't work

Nabil: you don't need a broadcaster for that? Pierce through it if you can! This is a solution, yes. Get them to a broadcaster. If the students, teacher or the dean of the university does not belong to the click of the of the broadcasters, their content may stay in the drawers of the university. It is not just here, Nagham. Go to TF1 it is the same. Go to NBC it's the same

Nagham: this is why online content...

Nabil: what you are suggesting is an amazing solution. Online! This why online... yes

Nagham: yes, online! We won't be stopped from distributing content and may succeed in influencing the media

Nabil: yes, but will you attract ads on online content, without going through Chwairy? Get ads! Get Nido to sponsor your series

Nagham: this is it! If funds can shoulder risks from the practitioners, it can work. The Danish experience as a small nation cinema, because you know we are talking about TV series, films and documentaries even, the Danish cinema found a solution to that

Nabil: syndicate?

Nagham: they are funders, but they increased their funding percentage from 40% to 50% following the big influence that Lars Von Treer had on the Danish cinema. For new comers they reduced the amount of money available and made the funders' employees partners in the creative process, so they work with the artist to develop movies and get involved creatively.

Nabil: I see, and they take a percentage from each ticket

Nagham: this allowed Danish cinema grown from a small nation cinema, like Lebanon, Tunisia and Algeria, and they reached production size of a medium size nation because of their increase outputs of productions and they are now recognised in the market. So, there is a way

Nail: their crew is small. The cinema crew is reduced nowadays thanks to the new digital cameras and the cost of the film stock is scrapped. So, a 10 people crew became 4. All of this serve. It is true

Nagham: true and we can get artists to make content, focus on creating content and make a living from it.

Nabil: we are going back to ground zero content content content

Nagham: yes indeed

Nabil: content. If it's good I can make with a mobile phone, if it's not 7000 Alexa and 800 Ari won't make it good. Content is the hero, we agree

Nagham: I agree 100%

Nabil: I hope our discussion was helpful

Nagham: it was very helpful thank you very much for taking the time especially today I know you are grieving

Sanaa Azzi: independent producer and founder of

Toni Tannous: independent producer and social content producer

Greetings and catching up; recording permission granted, explanation for changes since Nabil Asmar had to cancel the day due to his best friend virtual funeral.

09:44 Before telling you about the project, let me get your first impression about the idea itself and then I will brief you more about the details. By the way please express yourselves in the language you feel more comfortable with; not Dutch Toni (laughs)

If you are going to think about: how as media professionals we are going to counter extremism, what would you think? What is the first thing that comes to mind? Or what would you do as a strategy?

Sanaa: I am a bit extremist in what I am going to say. We have to monitor Social media

Nagham: yeah?

Sanaa: Yeah mainly. because I think extremism is getting stronger not due to mainstream media but due to social media

Nagham: That might be the case, but as a narrative? Their narrative is present in the cultural discourse

Sanaa: True

Nagham: They are using social media as a recruitment tool. So, they can target certain pockets of the community to recruit them. But the narrative is very available culturally and on mainstream media. If you want to counter the narrative what would you think?

Toni: Are we limiting it to the social media?

Nagham: no, we are talking as media professional what do we think?

Toni: because the media is now on social media, all content. So, for me, it is happening on social media and there's a problem that all social media, the laws of social media defer to the US law. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram they follow the American law. They not geo-localised like the content. For example, I reported a content where a woman said they deserve to be bombed; referring to the gay pride. I reported it, they opened a file here [Netherland] because she lives

here, and the police arrested her, and she was made to apologise and throw a press conference; it was a big deal. Facebook did not delete her account or comment. Their response claimed that they don't go against the standard of Facebook, which follow the American law. Another example, you put a picture, someone reports it, if it has nudity for example, the European law accepts that, but the pictures is deleted and maybe the account get deleted because of the American law... So, all of it are going back to the American law, and not the national law or the European Union or GCC. You know what I mean... So, it is not controllable because one is controlling all the communication

Nagham: It may dictate the laws of the platform, but the platforms can do their own things. Congress is talking about the possibility of breaking up Facebook. Twitter for example has a different stance on the issues you mentioned. Extremists recruit on both. However, the European Union have a big influence on Facebook, concerning data and sharing content, they were able to influence a lot of how Facebook geographically handles, particularly Facebook, handles our accounts. In Counter-narratives, the EU is dismantling accounts from social media and countering narratives: so, if you are going to these accounts, they intercept your traffic and redirect to counter-narratives. The problem with the counter-narratives is its content is not appealing

Sanaa: Yeah that is a problem

Nagham: so, you have an animated video of a talking head telling you stuff

Sanaa: Exactly, it is not attractive

Toni: It is not done by geniuses not just with media expertise but marketing and sales

Sanaa: marketing neuromarketing... AR, the algorithms available to serve social media, the mainstream are not to be reckoned with, it's true

Toni: You let a humanitarian organisation speaks with emotionality and poetry, which doesn't work, it doesn't communicate

Nagham: They don't do that. In all fairness to them, they don't do that. They have people. They are talking about Jihad and going to Syria but not targeting the underlying problem. Let's be honest, do people really want to discuss Jihad from the audience perspective, from your experience?

Sanaa: No

Nagham: This is the content that they are practically giving to them: Jihad, war, Syria, migration, Democracy....

Toni: They don't dare discuss the subjects as it should be discussed. They have to consider every word; they overthink every word, so they won't be accused of extremism or racism. They avoid addressing certain causes because of fear. They made laws that are working against them now. They made laws in Europe or elsewhere that prevents them from speaking freely.

Sanaa: We are getting to a point where the politically correct is becoming too restrictive. Correct? This is what you mean?

Toni: yes

Sanaa: There was a question Nagham asked concerning mainstream media, how can we control incitement to extremism, correct?

Nagham: yes

Sanaa: Yes. I think one of the main problems in the mainstream media if we are talking about the Arab World media, it's a media that does not respect the minimum ethical requirement that has to be respected from a journalistic perspective. You have people who make statements, you have an introduction for the news: a statement with a political concept and an opinion. This is not how it's supposed to be, honestly. Plus, we have another problem in the mainstream media news, which is news reporting that is focused too much on politics, focused so much on problems, refugees, rape, theft, devastation, poverty. It is always focused on that and there is nowhere we are offering people a real positive content, like what's done in European media. When you watch the French news bulletin, for example, you have the bomb, the theft but you still have the man in a remote village somewhere who is making something: organic cattle food and making profit. You'll have stories of how people are surviving COVID. Let's take COVID, not a political topic, in Lebanon or the Arab world how they cover it, people in hospitals dying in the ICU, everything is negative. Other places they focus on family reunions due to COVID and how they are reconnecting. There is no balance. It is all targeted to a specific place. And it is very very... I understand that all media have agendas, there is no media with no agenda, except very few, like BBC maybe and it is now under attack. No?

Nagham: BBC is a big issue on its own, yes there is that

Sanaa: Yes, there is loads of problems surrounding it. There is a code of conduct that needs to be followed. All media have agendas, but there is a minimum of reputation preservation. That

is something that, in the Arab world specifically, is not respected. Even CNN can provoke with or against Trump, ok. Correct?

Nagham: Yes, Trump was a special case there

Sanaa: Exactly, in a certain way. But it is not similar like for example Al-Arabia declares war on Qatar. This is the problem. There are no boundaries. The agenda is crystal clear there is subltities. This drive and incites extremism in people. There is no media that is presenting material for thinking. You either like Al-Jazeera or Al-Arabia, either one is your source, and none is giving you the other side's story.

Nagham: It is very interesting point you are raising. You made me think of a study that looked on those who resisted recruitment. Those have a way to express their identity and had a positive outlook on how to be active on the ground. So, to your point, all the information they're getting is blocking them from having any positive outlook or any hope...

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: it is a very interesting point

Sanaa: yes, exactly. I always bring this up. There's a problem. We like to highlight the bad side of things. This is how we conceive journalism here, and content. You have 2 types of content from the Arab world, if this is what we are talking about, correct?

Nagham: Yes, yes

Sanaa: You have the complete drama or the super shallow. But you don't have this content that is targeting people who want something constructive and entertaining. It is either you watch and get depressed and to counter them what do you have: this is the example of social media or Joelle Mardinian or Hoda Beauty. These are the examples. Either destitute refugees or all-day long makeup sessions. Where are the remaining people? Where are the daily lives of normal people? It doesn't exist in our media. This is my point of view, I don't know. What do you think?

Nagham: It's very interesting, Toni did you want to add something?

Toni: yeah, I wanted to say that we are now referring to the media in the Middle East. I know, the media's role is... This comes culturally by default with every negative news, let's say something happen aside a bomb, an earthquake is followed by something positive to neutralise it, just for the public opinion to avoid a mass panic simply...

Sanaa: True

Toni:... in a way it will affect, it won't cause a war, but it will have an effect on the community

Sanaa: true

Toni: but the thing in my opinion that can neutralise or incite or do whatever are a handful of media globally because they can mobilise public opinion not just locally, globally. I don't think... ok there are people who won't watch CNN because they don't speak English but it's not about Al-Arabia or LBC or MBC in my opinion. You need to target those who have control on the world stage, the media that are controlling the world: CNN, Sky, BBC. I wouldn't even say LCI or TF1 or Canal+ from a news perspective, they are barely watched by the French citizens

Sanaa: True

Toni: So, in my opinion, you need to target the giants, are they targetable? Or do they need to finance something like Al-Jazeera English that terrorised Israel and they requested from their congress to open a news channel on its level. Someone who can make a difference when it is not expected from him. So can we fight or get to these media to change their politics or their agenda, or their way or communication? Or in my opinion you need to create a media on their level and maybe bigger if it has a leg to stand on, because obviously it will come under fire.

Sanaa: umm

Nagham: no please you go ahead

Sanaa: no please, I am just thinking

Nagham: if you have a point to add because I am going go towards local...

Sanaa: I am not totally aligned with Toni on this point to target international organisations, I think we need to work more on the local content. There is a problem, when we are talking about the Middle East, we may be talking Lebanon or GCC, there is an interesting market that are tackling extremism which is Egypt. It is an interesting Market to study also, I don't know Nagham if you are...

Nagham: Egypt is my case study

Sanaa: Exactly. Egypt is very interesting. They decided to fight extremism, extremism between quotation marks: it's the influence of the Brotherhood. But I am not sure how smart this is. Their way is to control all media and make a specific type of content, even series and advertising is controlled; everything is one sided. This is something that is quite interesting and dangerous,

honestly. But for them, the best way to tackle extremism is to mute their voices completely. And this is why they go on alternative channels. So, we circle back to social media.

Nagham: And now people are bored and locked with COVID, so they are seeking them out

Sanaa: Exactly. So, I don't think we can talk about redirecting content without talking about social media. Even for me as a TV producer mainly, I produce a lot of online content. I am more interested in platforms; I am more interest in YouTube and online content. The thing is, I as a media consumer or audience, I don't follow a lot TV as much as I follow the social media accounts of the mainstream channels.

Nagham: same here, I get my news from Twitter from mainstream sources. Let me tell you now, what I did in this research and get your feedback. I think there need to be a cultural intervention and this is where we have to go local. Egypt as you mentioned, is my case study

Sanaa: oh great, amazing

Nagham: because of the obvious, their productions, al-Azhar, the Brotherhood was born there, and we can agree or disagree that this organisation sets the basic concept from which extremism organisations was based on

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: interesting that for us who lives in countries where they have presence, we agree instantly on their role

Sanaa: yes

Toni: can I add something before you go on Nagham because it is a little-known info. The brethren took the rule in Egypt and then there was a coup against them. Since then, they were deported, or subjected to capital punishment, or ran away. They can gain a refugee status in Holland, because they are considered a persecuted minority. I am not sure if the Dutch government is aware, I don't think so. Personally, I am not sure about the risk I am taking but I am spreading this news at least in the gay community, they are shocked as in to how.... They organised a petition as in to how this is permitted? They thought, it is a Muslim named Mohamed who fled because he changed his religion or became an atheist, they weren't aware that these people are coming in as minority with their ideology after they were destroyed in their country because they were drifting to an extreme. In any case, Egypt is a different culture and it is not a step too far from them in my opinion, maybe there are minorities who are atheists



or open minded. To me, there is no difference between someone who has an elaborate reaction to someone's nudity even if he's a believer, to me he is an extremist.

Sanaa: You are extremist in your vision of extremism (laughs)

Nagham: Sayid el-Qemani, an Egyptian scholar is very close to you in that. He sees everybody who wants to apply, the Quran, I think this is a direct quote, as an extremist since committing an extremist act becomes a matter of opportunity. It is the whole worldview that needs to be challenged. By the way, the ICCT-the Hague has plenty of studies that claims that political Islam is the antechambers of extremism if you are interested in some Dutch resources.

Sanaa: I am interested too

Nagham: I actually used this paper to make the point that we need to address a worldview... well, back to choosing Egypt. Egyptian films helped shaped the perception of early Islam. They are repeated on every holiday...

Sanaa: yes, true

Nagham: we can add to that the critics who came out from Egypt, and the private sector like el-Kahira wal Nass who produced Islam el-Behiri. We can agree or disagree with him...

Sanaa: yes true

[flow of conversation interrupted by the Zoom announcement]

Nagham: I had in my textual review of Islam el-Behiri, Sayid el-Qemani and unfortunately an apologist show, *Daring Question*, because you know, there are not a lot of choices for programmes tackling these issues. I think Al-Hayat channel anyway is producing Hamed Abdel-Samad and Mohamed el-Messayeh. All of the above can be simmered down to 3 big themes: Historical narrative, women status and minorities rights. Yesterday when I talked to Nabil, he confirmed that women and minorities are absent from MBC content and we all know the huge audience share of MBC

Toni: yes

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: how does that sound to you? How do these 3 themes sound to you from a content perspective, we are not just talking about documentaries, it's TV drama, cinema, talk show...we are discussing a wholesome media strategy. How do you think that might translate....

Toni: I might know the reason, or I have an idea I have no...

Sanaa: yes? what is the reason?

Toni: To me, in Dubai the media or MBC is handled by Lebanese. It's true that its PDG is

Sanaa: Foreign, he is French now

Toni: Israeli, I thought... Issam Bernadgi left?

Sanaa: yes, he did

Toni: this is the façade because in Dubai's top management there is always an Australian, American or British, no one else

Sanaa: that's true

Toni: I think that 95% of MBC is run by Lebanese as in content and producers who make that content. I am not saying it is their fault, but what is their background? Where is the Lebanese media? Did anybody teach them? Did they grow up on different values? No. I think it's cultural. They claim it's a mafia. That the Lebanese mafia is in charge of advertising and the media. yes, it's true but not as a mafia as a business. But yeah, there's no one else in charge, there's a need of someone in charge who has the right background and knowledge.

Sanaa: I think there's change coming. This change might be caused by Netflix and its introduction to the Arab world. Since I am a producer, I am pitching to broadcasters and platforms and so on. There is one recurrent word when new content is requested in the Arab World, and that is Netflixable

Nagham & Toni: yeah

Sanaa: which is good from my perspective. Because there is a lot of things, we used to present without anyone hearing about it. However today, there's a new generation of directors and content creators who are daring to think about new ideas, before them no one dared to think about. Plus, the fact today, that Netflix is offering an opportunity to all talents worldwide, so there's more pressure on Arab media or Arab platform to produce competitive content step by step with the new generation. This is one issue. Concerning women content, it's true there's not a lot of women content in the Arab world. And if it is available, it's always in a way... that I as [draw quotation marks] an empowered woman doesn't speak to me.

Toni: You empowered yourself (laughs)

Sanaa (laughing): yes, I empowered myself exactly

Nagham (laughing): the only way for empowerment

Sanaa: True

Toni: I was talking to Hammoudi the other day, if you watch *Suits*? It's a bit as if they are over-empowering women in there

Sanaa: True, true, yeah

Toni: At a certain point, even to me as a gay guy, if you empower women even if it doesn't concern me, it gives me hope that there's a mindset that is shifting and it is going to help me in some way

Sanaa: True

Toni: But I saw it as too much, I saw it as over-empowering and I thought it may be a wave that needs to come by and go; to help pass from an extreme to another before coming back to the centre. You want to change public opinion you need this hammering, so I think this is what is lacking, maybe *Suits* .... {overlapping conversation}

Sanaa: yes, this is what is lacking... *Suits*... We don't have to go to that extreme. Because there are empowered women who are there and they are not like that representation, not to the extent of: a slightly masculine figure with an androgynous type of femininity. Ok, this is a personal opinion, I don't feel the need as an empowered woman to dress in a suit and shirt and talk like a man to be able to do what I want. But I am talking as content in the Arab world how do we see women empowerment, when they decide to do something it. Always, the representation in series and drama, a successful woman is a woman who suffered beforehand and succeeded as a show of hand to the catastrophe she endured. No, it is not necessary. I can be a normal woman...

Toni: exactly

Sanaa: and I am living my life, I have a boyfriend, or I have a husband, or a family and I am smart, I am doing well. No, it is always a woman who is coming to take revenge and became strong despite the society. She is coming to achieve... coming with repressed anger, this is one. Or when we want to try to represent women empowerment in social programming, what do they bring you? In Egypt, they bring you this woman who opened a chariot of liver and started making sandwiches to support her children

Toni (laughing and shaking his head affirmatively): yeah

Sanaa: The woman who changes the car tyre. I will give you an example Nagham, I have a series for Sadim, which is a Qatari platform financed by Al-Jazeera. They wanted 2 series for women empowerment. For one of them, they got me a fun woman, a new talent, she is veiled and young. She is supposed to go and meet women who made it in Egyptian society. When I request suggestions from my research team in Egypt, what did they send me? The carpenter who helped her husband in his business and became a carpenter herself; the one who opened a liver cart and so on. I said there isn't a woman, I mean I want a normal woman, I want painters, a caricature illustrator, a woman who opened a normal business. It was a struggle to tell the research team working in mainstream media in Egypt, to find us positive example that succeeded without tragedies. We found those, and it was interesting. As a producer, I was interested to see that there's a 28 years old girl who needed a medication that she couldn't find so she developed an application with her friends; it is working well in Egypt and she is selling it to Netherland and Finland. You know? We found them but finding them is not the first reflex in media in general.

Toni: yes

Sanaa: I am talking as women empowerment

Nagham: no, you are absolutely right, I was talking to Nabil yesterday about this, I don't want to sound... or maybe I do you can challenge that

Sanaa: (laughs) yeah

Nagham: There's a lack of cultural policy in all governments. You mentioned Egypt had one regarding extremism. By the way, the persecution of Brotherhood happened twice, once under Abdel-Nasser and another under Sisi, both are dictatorships.

Sanaa: yeah

Nagham: When Abdel-Nasser persecuted them. Due to his torture in jails, they fled to Saudi Arabia and acquired some Saudi funding, went to Saudi Arabia and acquired some funds, not necessarily a government funding. Once they went back they changed the social fabric of Egypt to what we see today.

Sanaa: in Egypt?

Nagham: yes, Leila Ahmed talks about that about how this money that came from Saudi Arabia lead to the Islamisation of the social fabric in Egypt. This is when you have more veiled that is seen more frequently in the late 80s. If you look at the 70s not just in Iran, in Egypt... [The call was interrupted]

This is what underpins my media strategy -or if you prefer the thematic content suggestions- on how we can challenge this worldview and influence the social fabric to stop the recruitment and have our lives be better. I am just giving a little context. But what I am trying to say, for empowered women to exist and to have more of them, there is no obvious path. It either you have to be from a certain middle to upper class background to have this digital marketing background in order to have this opportunity; or to be on the very poor side where women can work the menial jobs that certain men don't want to..

Sanaa: True

Nagham: It's maybe dismissed as a typical feminist thing to say, there are this and that but there is this middle...

Sanaa: gap

Nagham: yes, there's a middle gap

Toni: yes

Sanaa: you know there is one thing, I am not sure you probably know better in your research. At a certain point, in the days of Mubarak, Susan Mubarak worked a little bit on empowerment. Contrary to popular belief, they worked a little bit on a raising awareness targeting women in the remote and poor areas. It was a big challenge, to start with in the time. Back then, they attempted empowering them to stop the circumcision

Nagham: yes

Sanaa: we are talking about Egypt. They started.... Susan Mubarak worked on that in a way or another. The current first lady, the Sisi lady is not working on this at all. There is nothing of the sort. The only thing they are working on is to mute the Brotherhood and to promote everything economy and industrial: new Cairo the new capital and the sorts. The media discourse is focused on these topics, there's nothing else, I think. When women empowerment is concerned, I think UAE has a very interesting development in this subject in the late years till now.

Toni: regardless, sorry between brackets, regardless if it is all about the image; it's all because it is a marketing and business driven country. But it can change a mindset because the people, the Emiratis, are a minority who want to differentiate themselves from other GCC states and the whole area

Sanaa: correct

Toni: you can tell. It started in Dubai where the hub started despite that Sharjah was the first hub; but Sharjah is something else. You can tell after 20 years, how the Emiratis from and living in Dubai have a different attire, walk and communication from the rest of the country. They learned, they did learn and it's spreading. Ras el-Khayma no one talks about, it's all about Dubai and Abu Dhabi, I know that.

Sanaa: yeah, yeah. They are half the country anyway even from a population concentration perspective, demography I mean

Toni: so, the marketing approach they used was beneficial to the mass. When we used to go out with Jad's brother in law, his friends who joined us with their wives: the Emiratis with Emirati roots not those married from abroad. They sat outside in a restaurant with us, a very common one, it's not about luxury, and in public the women had no veil they were showing their hair, and no Kuwaiti makeup or whatever they called it, because there is confidence. The tar7a is for them not even tradition

Sanaa: Folklore

Toni: Yeah. It has nothing, it never had anything religious in my opinion since it is not their costume. But there is a contribution from the government that changed the cultural perception of the country's citizens. This I experienced and I saw when I was living there.

(Talking overlaps)

Sanaa: The UAE example is very obvious, it is shocking. How much women are different like you said? Today, I deal with Emirati women. 10 years ago they were very different, it's a different approach; everything is different, they are scary. I prefer to deal with Emirati men over women because they are sharks, they are strong to this degree, strong and empowered they are confident in themselves and what they want. It started as you said as a marketing strategy, but it is supported by governmental decisions. You have a certain women quota in governmental positions, and it paid. I don't know Nagham what do you think?

Nagham: I am not claiming that my media strategy is a replacement to a cultural policy. What I am saying a cultural policy needs to start from here. I've done your work cause your government hasn't done it. That's it

Sanaa: Exactly, it's interesting but it boils down to how we can convince governments. We can't convince governments, so we have to find alternatives.

Nagham: we have to find alternatives, yes

Sanaa: do you think. This alternative, do you think I am asking you if today NGOs were to be created in the Arab world they can find funding? Of course, there has to be a political reason, let's not fool ourselves, to be able to get funds from abroad to create this sort of content.

Nagham: this is what I am arguing for my funding bit.

Sanaa: ok interesting

Nagham: in the end all this boil down to national identity. How do we define ourselves and how do you define your identity? We have a problem, precisely in how to define and do we perceive our identity. The transnational concepts of Arabism, Islamism as in the same borders approximatively vs. the localism of the minorities and the fundamentalism that is present in the minorities' discourse. We can debate however if they can give a local identity or certain difference between this country and another. From that angle, since there is lack of funding schemes, I am arguing that we need engaged scholarship: you know these universities that have film schools and can produce films, maybe they can be lobbied to produce this sort of content and hopefully it will trickle down to mainstream media. Hopefully, lobbying government to create cultural policies and allocate funds either in locally or abroad. Because if we change the representation and we have minorities that can identify...Take the Copts as an example how present they are in the public space.

Sanaa: That's true, they are inexistent

Nagham: I made a video on how Copts view their own image. It was an eye opener

Toni: please share

Sanaa: Really, that's interesting

Nagham: I've emailed the founder of Coptic nationalism, to ask him about how do they cross themselves, because its representation seemed odd to me. The Coptic woman is a fundamentalist woman doesn't drink beer, her clothes are buttoned up with no veil, she doesn't

watch TV, so he goes to his friends' house, the socialist Muslims, the moderate ones to watch news or football

Sanaa: yes, the socialists

Nagham: yes, when socialism was nice (laughs). He wrote back responding to my question and adding Muslims tend to project their own problems on Christianity so if extremism exists in Christianity then it is not a problem in Islam. Ok, so he is in the states, he may be able to talk freely but what about the....

Toni: I didn't understand. The Copts are masochistic in all their behavioural trend. I am not sure if I get this right, are they blaming themselves?

Nagham: no, he's not blaming himself. He is pointing out a ..... [interview interrupted]

He is claiming that Islamists project Islam's problems on Christianity to avoid addressing the issues. Same as Majdi Khalil who is frequently interviewed even on Al-Jazeera and he also has a similar angle.

Sanaa: ok

Nagham: so, we have another problem to address, angry minorities

Sanaa: True

Nagham: who cannot find a direction to act on. They are angry with everybody. There is a narrative in minorities as well as the mainstream Islamic narrative, that there are people who came in and colonised, enslaved, raped their ancestor and replaced them. It is similar to the narrative of the Native American narrative yet the parallel is not very developed. And on the other side, the Christian discourse from Copts, orthodox in all the Levantine Churches who are still upset that the West have adopted their religion and ruined it. The discourse is not developing, nor we are looking to the underlying causes of resentment

Sanaa: There is an identity problem in minorities particularly the Christians. You can understand to a certain extent how difficult it is for the mainstream media to tackle them, outside the cliché.

Nagham: they are stereotypical in their representation. Egyptian films either portray them as the fundamentalist Copt

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: or the Coptic thief who is stealing



Sanaa: (laughs) that's true

Nagham: And of course, there are Ossama's films that I looked at: *Janat el-Chayatin* and *Bahib Issima*

Toni: (smiling) *Bahib Issima* nice no?

Nagham: yes, his movies are among if not the best Egyptian movies in my opinion

Sanaa: True

Nagham: The Coptic Church waged a war on *Bahib Issima*

Toni: of course, they will, any Church would have

Nagham: it didn't speak to them. Apparently, it is not a hell perception that they have

Sanaa: I am going to speak outside the media, as someone who lived in Egypt who knows the social fabric and I love Egypt. Concerning the Copts, I walk in a street, you know Shobra and those areas are divided, there are mixed areas, if I see a non-veiled woman in the street of Egypt I can immediately recognise if she is a Copt or not. From the way she looks. The Coptic woman is non-veiled in appearance only, but she has a veiled mentality. Her posture, her dress code, how she walks, and all gives you the feeling that it is a woman who is not wearing a veil, but you can see how conservative she is

Nagham: yes

Sanaa: from her looks, when a Muslim woman is not veiled, she is not veiled. She gives you the feeling that she is more liberated.

Nagham: I understand that

Toni: but this because they are a minority true? One of the reasons maybe

Nagham: They abide by societal rule, Coptic women are circumcised in el-Sa3id

Toni: yeah?

Sanaa: correct. It's not a Muslim by the way, it's an African thing

Nagham: absolutely. This is another misrepresentation in reporting about the issue. Raseef for instance, they covered the topic, they had a list of countries that included Lebanon and Syria and others claiming they eradicated the practice. Not sure there are cases in these countries

Sanaa: exactly it was never present in these cultures

Nagham: it is recently introduced in Kurdistan

Sanaa: Oh

Nagham: and Syrian women who remained in the Caliphate apparently many of the have been subjugated to that. There is a Kurdish woman, I met in London who was doing a PhD thesis on the subject in the rural areas of Slaymaniyeh in Kurdistan, where extremism conservatism or whatever you want to call it have made this pop up again.

Sanaa: No! really!

Nagham: It is surprising in Kurdistan, considering their major political parties have an ideology that is constructed around empowered women and how Sumarian actually caused the decline of women status.

Sanaa: True, that is correct

Nagham: So, I am dividing the approach in tackling Islamism on two levels: the mainstream issue tackling the historical narrative; the second going more local on identity issues with women and minorities. Again, I am seeking your input on how that might work; how does that sound at first, how that might work and how can we support you funding wise?

Sanaa: for me, if we want to create content tackling these issues, we have these problems we covered before which is how to tackle in an entertaining, nice way not in an informative kind of lecturing speech

Nagham: yes absolutely

Sanaa: it will be great to create or to produce a kind of series, that is really nice built around women, that has good production values, Netflixable (drawing quotation marks) that would make it appealing for Netflix, or Shahid. Working along these lines instead of doing what has always been done, which is not getting to the wider audience, which is we do very nice documentaries with scholars, with people thinking with too much information. At the end of the day, at home the audience member who puts on Netflix at home, if he does not belong to a certain intellectual class, he will not watch them. What do you think Toni?

Toni: 100% agree. But I want to say something from my point of view concerning overdoing it. To me, women do not need empowering, they are already powerful. Doing something to empower them means someone is working to empower them when they have no power. For me content and media should not empower, it should normalise powerful women

Sanaa: yes, normalise powerful women

Toni: expose them

Nagham: that's a great way of putting it

Toni: Exactly, put them in a context that is normal. Yes, she is doing everything not as an iron woman or femme fatale. Not all women are femme fatale. Just normalise

Sanaa: It can even a housewife that is very good, that is powerful. That's normal. Even a housewife has her mark, she doesn't need to be a CEO to have that

Toni: We are all at home now. Anybody who has an impact on the world and the economy is at home now. It doesn't matter if she is a head a company. For me, if you empower it is like a propaganda, and there will be a counter-propaganda. There are people who are going to react. So just normalise, so they can see and understand where we are at

Sanaa: You know, this is quite weird, the ads that bombard me on Facebook, I always receive an ad for Masters in Women Leadership. And I am like why do I need a Masters in Women Leadership? It's from a university. Why is there a need for such a specialisation? It pisses me off, it gets on my nerves. And why are you targeting me first of all? (laughs) why women leadership? It can just be leadership without the women

Toni: Ok this is a mistake if they want to be very conscious of what they are doing they wouldn't do that. But they are following a marketing plan

Sanaa: Marketing yes

Toni: they are following the market, and responding to how the market thinks, yes. But do we start with the market or do we start with them. I think both need work

Nagham: unfortunately, a fight/war is not fought on one front. A coalition might be needed, and this is why we need engaged scholarship to push some representations instead to have it solely relying on mainstream media. Do you know *Ordi Hallan*, Fatin Hamama

Sanaa: Yes Fatin Hamama

Nagham: Fatin Hamama starred in a film where she was trying to divorce and failed. As a result, the law was changed

Sanaa: exactly

Nagham: so, this type of content where you are representing struggle with an activism undertone is very needed on the local level

Sanaa: exactly but it was done in a dramatic way, drama-film

Nagham: voila

Sanaa: a normal film without the talking head of women must... For example, in Lebanon if we make a nice movie, without an excess of drama, a nice entertaining film, about I don't know a very nice working Shia woman and what she was put through by the Ma7kameh el-Ja3fariyeh. And how she struggles in her day to day life, we can even see her have a drink with her friends, and we see her working and maybe have a boyfriend other than her husband, I mean her boyfriend since she is divorced. While she is struggling with the court to take back custody of her son or daughter

Nagham: or even to see them in some cases

Sanaa: exactly, even to see them

Nagham: Exactly. So, just to tell you are very helping in articulating the ideas, and it is very appreciated.

Toni: I want to go back to something that Sanaa has said.

Nagham: yes please.

Toni: I was saying that we need to target giants or to create another giant. Sanaa said that all the content that is requested by the Dubai media needs to be Netflixable.

Sanaa: yes yes this is the word right now, le mot-fétiche if you want

Toni: Even-though in Dubai there were other providers on the same level of Netflix and international. 5 years before Netflix, STARZ started... STARZ, which was at the same level of Netflix, maybe not in reach, but as a quality of content. ICfix the first one started in the UAE was powered by Netflix. It had content from Netflix. The Netflix content was available on OSN. That was Netflix was late to enter the market because the right to the content was acquired by OSN. Netflix started with maybe 10% of its content till the contract of OSN expired then they requisitioned it

Sanaa: True, true

Toni: There wasn't any influence before Netflix entered the market because Netflix is the giant, not STARZ, nor ICFLIX nor OSN. That's my point from the giants, Nagham

Nagham: I do understand that. Netflix business model tells wall street that we are the masters of the market. They are now producing their own content in the Middle East, the series that was produced in Jordan,

Toni: Yes, it was fun. It was the first time Jordan was seen from this perspective or you see something with paranormal narrative coming from the Middle East, produced there I mean.

Nagham: yeah despite that the paranormal is very present in the Middle East. Honestly, *Thousand and One Nights...*

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: it is still present in our daily lives. Apparently in Egypt, people file police reports claiming that Jinn kidnapped or stole or whatever.

Sanaa: that's true

Nagham: that shows the influence of the Hadiths and their impact on people

Sanaa: true

Nagham: just for comparison, the most watched counter-narrative for example has a couple thousands of views. A channel with a couple from the UK, I am comparing animated videos from the UK had around 4000 and this British couple went on YouTube live talking on the evil eye, they had 1million live views. Paranormal is very popular and very present in our daily lives

Sanaa: yes, it is. Do you know this sheikh, they ask him for stuff, I forgot his name, he goes on an Egyptian TV channel do you know him Toni?

Toni: I thought you were taking about the Lebanese one who gets call to make Khireh?

Nagham: this is common everywhere

Sanaa: no no

Toni: no I don't know him

Sanaa: I will send you a link. He gets millions of views. He says stuffs that are really completely nonsense, like really completely nonsense. You see the huge amount of people who follow them. In the Arab world, you have people with capacity to follow

Toni: yes of course

Sanaa: stuff that doesn't make sense in an abnormal way as you said.

Toni: yes, but I don't think there's much difference between them and those British, British Muslim right? You have it Nagham?

Nagham: Pardon?

Toni: There's a British channel called British Muslim. They communicate in the exact same way that we see on these evangelical or Egyptian channels, or even Iraqi, there's a lot of Iraqi channels, el-dawa3i da3iyat something

Sanaa: Like Ikra2 etc...

Toni: yes

Nagham: It is the same technique

Toni: on the street

Nagham: understandable, when a worldview is solely based on scriptures and tradition, setting the Sufis aside, Shia and Sunni have similar worldview and similar talking points. The difference between Hezbollah's and the Brotherhood's vision is who rules us. There's not much difference on the internal concept of the regime. An Iraqi sheikh, Iyad I forgot his family name, was talking about a Lebanese sheikh who puts the foundation of wilayat el-Faqih in al-Azhar. They are aligned on how to implement political Islam in our daily lives. I am not concerned with the route to heaven, but I am concerned with how these laws stemming from a certain political understanding does affect my life as a woman, maybe a minority member, as a straight or gay person.

Sanaa: yes

Toni: yes, but

Sanaa: it is challenging but to be able to find the funds I think the politics will play a very big role in this

Toni: are the funds you are planning for governmental funds; do they have to be governmental funds?

Nagham: they can be anything. There is nothing binding about a PhD. If I said we need a cultural policy, or said to Les Fonds Sud, they are now integrated in the CNC you need to prioritise and

rethink how you fund certain types of content, or reconsider your spending rules since they require 50% of their grants of their money to be spent in France

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: if you reconsider that you might have a bigger impact on these particular issues. There are many ways with what's available to increase impact. There are funding channels. Europe's neighbours for example, they still funds campaigns, campaigns don't really work

Toni: they don't, they don't. I have a solution that is very basic and primitive. The way I see this from our conversation; a humble smart solution would be, whenever you propose content, keep the funds the same, the one that is coming to the production, it can be used instead of reaching out for another funds, we can start implementing or integrating some smart solutions or characters or protagonists in the content that you are sending, Sanaa, for the MBC or any other Arabic TV. So, you don't go through the campaigning, the propaganda and the push back and get more attention to what you are doing.

Sanaa: this is what I am saying, use the mainstream media indirectly

Nagham: this is the heart of it...

Sanaa: we create a nice content, this way we can pass on what is needed, we start pumping things and in counterparts...

Toni: yes, create a new...

Sanaa: yes true, get a big star. Today, instead of paying 500,000\$ to produce, it's a hypothetical, to produce 5 documentaries that might be viewed at the end by 100,000 persons

Toni: nodding approvingly: yes

Nagham: umm we still need both, ok!

Sanaa: maybe I can pump 2.5 million\$ on a series, good one with a star and we're telling a nice story and we are passing the message behind it. Ipso facto there will be a campaign on this series because it has this mega star, dunno Nelly Karim or Minna Chalabi or whomever. This can pick, it can create an avalanche on social media and the message gets out faster for a wider audience.

Nagham: Absolutely, that is...

Sanaa: Because where are the funds are granted? They are granted for specific people. Tell me if I am wrong, the money is always given to Nadine Labaki

Nagham: True

Sanaa: Nadine Labaki makes a very good movie, a very strong movie like Caphernahoum. Regardless, many people liked it others didn't. I recognise the amount of work and effort put in the movie, but this movie didn't touch me, this is personal. These movies are done for who? They are doing it for a European audience. Is it changing really anything really in the reality of the population? Is the big mass-public who is suffering were touched or felt that their voices are heard or even watched the movie? No

Toni: these movies are being made because the producers are foreigners. They are seeking exotic topics that they can sell in their home countries and can be entered in a film festival. She is not even targeting her own mass-audience.

Sanaa: this is why I mean. To be entered.... This is a problematic perception that we have from funds coming from Europe and America, it is Orientalism. These are Orientalists who are coming to speak of the Orient. But we want to change the things for us on our soil, we need people from the land, the (Orientaux) Orientals who are working with the lived reality, not the phantasm of the Orient

Nagham: Orientalism is another issue to be reckoned with. To your point, I took issue with the book *Lebanese cinema* by Lina Khatib who considered that *Lebanese cinema* is a war cinema

Sanaa: This is not true; this upset me. It bothers me a lot. Enough

Nagham: I will send you the suggestions of the book on how *Lebanese cinema* can be funded. It may not sustain a dead cat. (laughs)

Sanaa: True

Nagham: anybody who drank a coffee on a film set can see it is a viable plan

Sanaa: correct and this is the problem with Lebanese cinema, all of it is built on the idea of the war

Nagham: absolutely, that was enable by Les Fonds Sud who supported films that corresponds to their depiction of the country and addressed to their own audience. You produced something Toni on the topic, Itchy Hummus? So did I in my graduation movie

Toni: Yes



Sanaa: yes. I want to give you an example of a content that I consider very funny, a very simple Lebanese movie addressing the problem of a girl who wants to get married, the relationships, homosexuality, called *Khabsa*, did you watch it?

Toni and Nagham: No

Sanaa: *Khabsa* by Chadi Hanna, it's kind of a dinner between a girl who wants to incite her boyfriend's jealousy because she met the perfect man who turns out to be gay. But how she discovers him and the plot, is extremely funny. But you find that the gay character is funny and nice, and they touched on how much he is challenged socially. This poor gay guy who doesn't like women, but he has to get married because he has to inherit and provide a successor. The girl is living for 4 years with her boyfriend, and he suddenly decided he doesn't want to get married anymore and his parents gets involved. It's so funny, really. It touches on social issues without the militarism

Nagham: Thank you and without preaching

Sanaa: exactly

Toni: voila

Nagham: and these never-ending monologues. Tell the story show don't tell

Sanaa: watch the film seriously you'll enjoy it

Toni: Netflix is releasing Lebanese movies...

Sanaa: It's on Netflix

Toni: They don't appear in Holland

Nagham: you have to look for it

Toni: there are some series I started in Dubai that I can't find here, it's really basic around here, maybe I will find it on Apple TV

Sanaa: *Khabsa* is a thing

Nagham: I stopped Netflix (laughs)

Toni: There was a discussion, I know it is the trend and Sanaa you said something that we all believe, this was going to be the future but at some point we suffocated, we bought a box, it was cheap enough 80 euros and you top it up yearly, you have access to all the channels and you can't imagine how sweet it is, we missed zapping...

Sanaa: I had a project a few years ago to create some kind of platform, a hybrid platform. I am looking for funds for it. It will contain VOD and you can open and access programming. You can either be catered or access video on demand, a hybrid one. I had this theory

Nagham: like Hulu?

Sanaa: yes, something like Hulu, I have the theory. We have CDs and there's anghami but I still like listening to the radio. There is a difference between playing the song you like and stumbling on it when you are driving, it is a completely different feeling

Toni: yes

Sanaa: the same thing. You go to a restaurant and you order a la carte but sometimes you enjoy the set menu

Toni: yes

Sanaa: think for me and give me the food

Nagham: this is why we check our tv channels before going to Netflix and browse for hours without watching

Sanaa: correct

Toni: What they managed to do, I know about this because I worked in a company that was producing this kind of technology, Celevision

Sanaa: I remember

Toni: we were the ones who built the platform for Elife *Etisalat* that was the first in the region or in the UAE, that is providing content with its own box. It did not work the same way Netflix worked, Apple TV didn't make it in the region except with a few gay people, it was Netflix

Sanaa: correct

Toni: I wanted to say something, damn I forgot

Sanaa: Celevision

Toni: yes, the hybrid platforms, other than Hulu and what you talked about Sanaa, there was a time when we participated with something called HBBTV, hybrid, broadcast, broadband TV which goes on satellite and you merge it with the internet, so it's a satellite but it's called hybrid because the internet is combined with the Satellite. So, when you watch, you get to watch your

media but at the same time you click on the remote control and you buy the tie that the actor is wearing. You participate in quizzes. They aimed, to combat VOD to do this

Sanaa: to do something interactive

Toni: it was overwhelming, because it is not what people want. Imagine, you are opening an important article, and you pay for access, you get pop ups from Google, because Google is on top, its laws is on top of any laws of any website. We were being harassed; this is harassment....

Sanaa: we are solicited to the point that we don't want it anymore

Toni: voila, so if you want to communicate you, you need to choose a platform that doesn't harass. That's one other thing

Sanaa: that's interesting. So, if there are funds to be allocated for this sort of thing, it needs to reconsider granting its support for a content that is popular, "grande surface" if you want

Toni: voila

Nagham: absolutely that answers local needs and how they consume

Toni: underground and alternative is a minority, they can't change the society

Sanaa: yes

Toni: from my perspective, I give you money Sanaa to produce whatever you are producing and to integrate not even in a subliminal way, but you integrate the characters and the culture within. Me, I know that the world is digital, and the influencers are more important than celebrities, so I go to influencers and I say look highlight what's in this show, make a big thing out of it

Sanaa: you know, I don't know if you know or follow her Ashia.

Toni: No

Sanaa: Ashia is quite a big influencer in Kuwait. She's an American-Kuwaiti. Ashia is a very interesting personality. She is an Americanised Kuwaiti, she was veiled. A year, a year and a half ago, all of a sudden she took off her veil... Hello..... (problem with earphones)

Sanaa: so, she unveiled, and she became a curls' ambassador in the Arab world, her hair is that... Anyway, she launched a campaign last week. She was circulating with her hair or something and a car followed her in Kuwait. She did a campaign on harassment in Kuwait and how women are harassed, she did it, from her own stories and created did a big buzz in this issue, like huge

Toni: yes

Nagham: yes, that's how you do campaigns

Sanaa: and stories like the girl of Fermont you know about it?

Nagham: no

Sanaa: In Egypt, a story broke early summer called Fatat el Fermont. It's a girl who was partying with her friends in Fermont Nile City, obviously, she got raped

Toni: gang raped

Sanaa: yes, and she had the guts to call out the people who raped her. There was a big avalanche around her in Egypt on social media. Mainstream media had to address the topic eventually. The police were forced to capture the kids of very important people in Egypt due to the big campaign and laws were made regarding harassment and rape and the length of the sentence. They modified their laws due to this campaign. It started by her speaking out, and women started following her. She is from the Khodir family, I think Canada granted her a refugee status for psychological reasons

Toni: the gay community helped a lot in this

Sanaa: yes, the gay community did help in this, definitely

Nagham: well digitally how can you get anywhere without gay community being engaged

Sanaa: especially in media let's be honest, the gay community has a very big influence on media worldwide

Nagham: being gay needs to be normalised in representation too. We talk about democracy, yet rights of equal citizens and representation is inexistent

Sanaa: You know UAE is making big moves in this topic. You know UAE will be hosting one the biggest conferences about the sexual identity in the world

Toni: I know for a fact that, not regardless, there was gay clubs in Dubai, official gay clubs, one of the best. They know there is a gay community, but they are benefiting from them. They were the ones changing their furniture every year or 6 months

Sanaa: true

Toni: they created parties that became international and attracted visitors, take the wonderland or the wasteland as an example. It doesn't have drugs like in Europe; this was all done by the

gay community. But it's not all about that. In UAE and Dubai specifically, Ramadan barely exists, they open restaurant, it's very commercial

Sanaa: cohabitation is not forbidden anymore, it's legal now in UAE

Toni: yes, you don't find the restaurants covered up anymore

Nagham: Dubai or all over the country?

Toni: Not in Sharjah I am sure

Sanaa: I think it's all over the country, but mainly Abu Dhabi and Dubai. It is no longer a problem for 2 non-Emiratis to live together if they are not married. Before, it was happening, but it was illegal.

Toni: it was legalised

Sanaa: if they decided to pick on you, they can jail you for it. It may have not happened, but it was possible. This is no longer the case

Nagham: It will be interesting to see how this will pan out. When it comes to gay rights, there's the bulldog approach. The extremists threaten then mainstream institutions steps in to prevent the bloodshed, the examples are many take the Beirut Gay Pride, El-Olama el-Moslimin threatened the organisers and Dar el-Fatwa implored the authorities to stop the conference. So, they pitch themselves as the moderate ones

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: they never condemned those who threatened violence. It will be interesting to see if a bulldog will manifest in time for the Dubai conference

Sanaa: There are no bulldogs left in Dubai anymore Nagham. With the last agreement, I think that's done

Toni: Do you remember something Nagham? We talked about once. When a police state or a modern dictatorship, it's a dictatorship, I agree, but Nagham if Dubai wasn't like that, it wouldn't be able to cancel the laws that many would've lobbied to make it more extremist. The modern dictatorship was necessary. You can't implement a Norwegian law in The Emirates because they wouldn't be able to cancel the extremism of Ramadan, or the extremism that the GCC countries are ruled by, they are ruled by Saudi Arabia and not UAE. So, they needed this modern dictatorship to get to somewhere else. For me, it was the right way to do it. There are some people who cannot be ruled by a democracy, full stop.

Sanaa: I agree, I am not for democratising democracy (laughs)

Nagham: this what scares me. You are not the only ones anyway, it's part of the Coptic nationalism who claims to stop Islamisation you need a dictatorship. This our tragedy, we are on a pendulum that goes from the mosque to the armed forces.

Sanaa: correct

Nagham: it is a challenge; in a real democracy you cannot mute Islamists but how do you protect yourself?

Sanaa: Correct

Nagham: I understand your stance. A real democracy is needed to protect everybody but how can you eradicate this worldview without a cultural policy and allowing true representation

Sanaa: there is something very fundamental is Islam, it's the religion of the state

Nagham: yes absolutely, this is how it's pitched

Sanaa: it's a very, I won't say impossible but it's a very long process. As long as people are not comfortable, financially specially, enlightenment is not really possible

Nagham: I am not quite sure that is so impossible. Islamist parties are built as opposition parties, so their ceiling is always high without having any governing strategy. The governments are not offering proper representation. So yes, with no actual governmental plan to eradicate the problems, no democracy, no representation or no cultural policies it may take us a long time. With all of the above, it may be what 10-15 years, a couple of decades

Sanaa: correct, but we need to start somewhere, I understand

Nagham: absolutely, we need to start somewhere. There is a way to dissociate the idea of religion and state. Yes, the political discourse is a tragedy since these political parties twisted definitions to what suits them particularly secularity. Media helped anchoring identity as regional instead of a relationship to the land, and this regional media that collected regional content without creating cultural exchange

Sanaa: Correct

Nagham: Dubai as you were saying created this cultural exchange in a globalised city

Toni: it created standards that weren't available in the region

Nagham: It sounds to me, like this is very similar to the Baghdad of the Abasside Empire where diversity creates progress. Which is something we can focus on. People being together created a certain norm and a certain progress. I am digressing, I was trying to formulate and validate a plan. Religion and a state is coming from a retelling of a narrative that might be false, the 4 Caliphs upon which it is based, I won't say never existed, but there is no historical evidence of their existence. If a factual historical narrative was produced and put it out to the public on the one hand and on the other work on our local identity perception and how we can redefine it, does that make sense to you?

Sanaa: yes, it does

Toni: it does make a lot of sense Nagham. On the bright side, when I look at Dubai, again when I go to Dubai not by fanaticism, it is not money that made happen because Saudi Arabia and Qatar have more, plus in term of sustainability the UAE does not have resources that other GCC countries have, but there are logistics, they think, they plan. And they are not really democratic, their population or suppliers there is a fine line, there is planning and a strategy, something that does not exist in surrounding countries. So, it is not about money, you don't need only money, we can make things happen

Nagham: yes, you need a plan. I didn't mean democracy as in implementing plans just to be clear. I meant by democracy representation and being able to talk about the issues of the country, one of which is political Islam if they have enough votes, they have to be represented

Toni: Democracy when minorities have a voice. It is not the voting that is democracy, if I voted for MPs or a president that is another format, that is democracy? What is the difference between them and the ruler of UAE? It is not about politicians; it is about ideologies and implementations of of...

Nagham: laws?

Toni: exactly

Sanaa: they have a vision actually

Toni: Also, Saudi Arabia has a vision for 2030

Sanaa: Do you know that UAE is now working on their vision 2071

Nagham: that's good

Sanaa: I've received a pitch. They are preparing courses for senior government employees. This is in preparation for their first millennium in 2071. It is something. They don't have a past so they are focusing on their future (laughs)

Toni: yes, it is a fact, they don't have it, they can't create it

Sanaa: but they can create the future this is what they are doing. Maybe we can create something like she was saying. Going back to the funds, if there will be funds for a populist media, with indirect messaging it can create a change

Nagham: Do you think they will be appetite, if we actually said to producers you can actually help by doing this this and this in your content development...

Sanaa: yes

Nagham: you think they can be lobbied

Sanaa: yes yes I think we can. I do think, we can, yes. I know from myself as a producer, I pitch ideas that I believe are really nice and that people will love but the mentality of those running the media weren't accepting it. The mentality has changed nowadays. Because today, who's running the media, our generation. For a certain while we handled executions, now we, the 40s are running the media in the Arab world. There is a different mindset, there is a different approach and I am able to sense that with new directors, not just the Lebanese ones, Tunisians, Egyptians and even Khalijis. If that is supported... Look I am going to give you a simple example, a series that we may find cheesy or we don't like anymore, but I love it, it is Sex and the City. When it was done early 2000s late 90s it was something. You have women talking about their sexual lives and their partners. It was shallow but it changed how women spoke about their sexuality in the US from 20 years till now.

Toni: yes

Nagham: and in the world, yes absolutely

Sanaa: and in the world, exactly. I don't think the previous generation view their sexuality or dared to speak about their sex lives in the same way as they did after Sex and the City. They created icons, beautiful, they wear Manololo Blani, Christian Dior and Hermes. At the end they are talking about subjects, the form is very beautiful, very nice and entertaining but it was about serious things. They made a social change. We need to create that kind of content in the Arab world.



Nagham: I completely agree yes absolutely

Sanaa: in relation to extremism. Even, how do we film extremists in the Arab World or in Egypt. In the dress with the beard that he made reddish.

Toni: yes (laughing)

Sanaa: like Toni said, there are people with extremist's mindset but looks modern. It is their thinking that is problematic. This is what's happening. I don't know if you are paying attention to these new Egyptian Da3iya,

Nagham: yes

Sanaa: like Ismail

Toni: sexy, good looking, well dressed

Sanaa: very trendy. One is called Karim Ismail

Nagham: yes

Sanaa: He is young and have a hyper hipster look. Messy hair, jeans hoodies, speaks great English, he has a burger restaurant. His discourse is worthless. I look at him, wow very nice, an influencer with millions of people following him, but his discourse is disastrous

Nagham: yes, we always represented extremism as an imported problem. Levantines and North Africans pointed fingers at Saudi Arabia so the Da3iyeh always looks like the Muslim Brotherhood look who wear the watch in the right hand not the left

Sanaa: yes

Nagham: the visual you described. Europe sees it as general Muslim so here in the UK it is as a Pakistani import, Amsterdam and Belgium as Moroccan

Toni: Moroccan and Turkish. Practically all the physical attacks that are happening are done by Moroccans and Turkish

Nagham: the discourse shifted slightly to less violent in Canada per example. Oh Gosh, I really kept for a long time,

Sanaa: no worries

Nagham: I am sorry I kept it for more than

Toni: no no I am happy with the discussion

Sanaa: no don't worry, it is a very interesting discussion. It is very interesting what you are doing.

Nagham: Thank you. Any last thoughts, anything you want to add

Toni: As long as you keep targeting, in your project, the mainstream, because unfortunately the people who thinks about these issues in our area are either homosexuals or liberal women or hipsters unfortunately I hate that term, it is always underground and alternative and it is the minority who speaks about these issues. But I think we should make the mass-population more receptive to these ideas either subliminally or indirectly because the flag cannot be carried by this second group of people

Sanaa: correct

Toni: they are not a reference for the mass

Nagham: absolutely, this is the whole point of the project, to push on mainstream media. 10 opposing people won't matter if you can mute them

Toni and Sanaa: correct

Nagham: so, we need to have these discussions on mainstream media, to be able to create the change needed in the cultural sphere using the dramatization of content is a necessity

Sanaa: correct and this content need to be smooth, creative and *mine de rien* not militant. Militarism for me, even in politics. One of the main things in Lebanon I oppose the civil society, I don't oppose you because what you are saying is incorrect, you are correct, but you are unable to engage emotionally the masses. So, we have to produce more creatively and less militarism

Toni: Like the series of Elie Maalouf

Sanaa: yah what an example

Toni: they might be silly or even stupid, but this is what is consumed by the population. This is the level of the series that gets to the masses, they love it and it touches them. Simply

Nagham: I don't know about that, the population are consuming American series of high standard as well

Toni: that's true

Sanaa: I think they are producing content with the money they have. If you have more money to produce better content for the mass, they'll take it. If you have enough to buy charity clothes

you will buy charity clothes. But if I came and told I am offering you something nice, I am offering you a Dior dress, you will wear it

Toni: I know that, but what scares me that we as people from the media industry, concerned with the art and the quality, we have 2 things to fight, to do, we always tried to do to be creative and deliver a message. The 2 cannot be done simultaneously, you cannot create a very creative and inspirational because it will immediately be directly to the hipsters or to a certain fringe

Sanaa: not necessarily. This is the challenge in the creative method that we haven't reached yet. This is the real challenge, to find new creators, not Claudia Marchalian style, that are thinkers with a real varied cultural background not pretentious and can deliver nice product, and I am able to find them. I am starting to meet them, they are there.

Nagham: what I am pitching Toni is that your story is the message. Your choice of story is the all the activism needed. It is not the one film that will change everything, we are brickmaking with these productions

Toni: yeah

Nagham: I will give an example, we can represent a subject living in an empire, like Abbasid, and that he was jailed because the Caliph got into one of his moods, it can bring home the idea of rights we have in the modern state. So your story and how you are delivering it is the message in itself and somebody else might build on it in the public debate. You can see where I am coming from?

Toni: yes I get it

Sanaa: yes

Nagham: fantastic, many thanks

Toni: Nagham, just so I know did you feel that we are answering your questions, or did we digress and got to other issues because we always tend to...

Nagham: not at all that was very helpful, it was great validated and expanded the framework

## 7.3 Spies

I received these screenshots from @Carl (2016) who asked me for a translation which he released on twitter. The following is the screenshots of an ISIS communiqué shared on their telegram channels and the translation.

Spies, employed by intelligence agencies, infiltrating the social media supporters of the Caliphate are divided to 3 categories:

- 1- First category's job is to criticise the Caliphate, its leaders and its media, especially diwan el l'am, and attempts to collect information on those featured in its publication
- 2- Their job is to criticise the Caliphate's methods arguing it is different to the methods followed by other leaders. The intelligence agencies recruited Zawahiri's orphans and the olama of tawaghit; as a worshiper of the cross once said
- 3- 3<sup>rd</sup> category is the one that always criticises the supporters of the Caliphate because they are the line of defence against all 3 categories

We will start by the first category:

The spies in social media follow the Caliphate's publications, then they select the pictures of the speakers and they share it to their social media team.

Their aim is to gather information in order to identify them; so spies and those who infiltrated the rank of supporters publish their pictures and accuse them of Gholat (wrong doings). Publishing these pictures and accusations aim to:

- 1- Defame the Caliphate media because it features, what they call, these gholat... they aim to depict that this is not the Caliphate that Muslims dream of so you should stop supporting it and go back to the Taghout's barns

- 2- They want to gather their information so crusaders can target them, they provoke supporters with these false accusations to anger supporters and without meaning divulging while defending them
- 3- Slander the Caliphate, its caliph and leaders by depicting them all as gholat
- 4- Base a big lie over a small truth and create false stories about them, their sole focus is libelling the Caliphate and its diwans
- 5- If they stumbled on a small error they exaggerate and multiply the stories to libel the Caliphate, its leaders and media
- 6- They focus of the Media diwan, the one that exasperated crusaders and their intelligence and spread terror in their hearts by its publication that encouraged targeting them in their own turf

Of course, they know they could not touch the Caliphate in general and the Media diwan in particular, but they try to cast doubt in the supporters, and they have failed to achieve that so far, all thanks due to Allah

They tried a new strategy hoping to break the commitment of the official Caliphate media. So, they established new channels reporting on battles not mentioned by the official channels. The official channels commitment exasperates the spies because they cannot target supporter with fake news, they have tried and failed many times, and thanks to Allah, they will continue to fail

Therefore, anyone who publishes a picture of a mujahid in the Caliphate and accuses him of anything or mocks him is a spy serving crusaders and aims to gain from them

The second category: Their job is to criticise the Caliphate 's methods arguing it is different to the methods followed by other leaders. The intelligence agencies recruited Zawahiri's orphans and the olama of tawaghit; as a worshiper of the cross once said

This category's describes the Caliphate 's method as a method of gholat and khawarij, so they describe the apostate Taliban as mujahidin, and so are the Zawahiri's al-Qaeda apostates who are Taliban's soldiers originally

They also see the commoners of Rawafid (Shia) as brethren, their enemies are solely those who wear the Amamah (Clerics), the proof to this claim is the bay'a of Hazara Rawafid to apostate Taliban and Taliban accepting it, without any protest from al-Qaeda of Zawahiri, their defenders or Taliban

They question the Caliphate 's doctrine in takfir (apostating) the elections and those who engage with it (both runners and voters). They pushed this in many publications. No doubt that pinpointing elections as apostasy is a blow to the world's order and the Olama of taghout the dogs of crusaders, so they fought vigorously to scrap this order spreading quotes from Zarquawi's (May Allah accepts him) and quoted from sheikh Abu-Omar el-Baghdadi (May Allah accepts him) and they interpret their words to their likings. But the Caliphate supporters published recorded messages of Zarqawi arguing the voters' apostasy, stunning the spies and they failed as per usual.

Regardless of the existence or absence of these recordings, this is the religion of Allah we do not follow men. We follow the book of Allah and the sunnah of its prophet (PBUH)... we uphold most dear what adhere to it and disregard what disagrees with it

But those who socialise with Iranian Majouss (a slur to Zoroastrians) sitting with Kassem solaimani, became like the Rafida, they worship symbols (clerics) and believe men cannot make mistakes

Every time they do not approve of a Caliphate 's jurisprudence ruling they appear to cause trouble, trying to lie to the Ansar (supporters) pinpointing that this was not banned by Zarqawi or Abu-Omar el-Baghdadi. By God, this is ignorance. Do we take our religion from men or from the book and Sunna so we say Allah said and the prophete of Allah said (pbuh)...?

When spies quote sheikh Zarqawi (May Allah accepts him) and sheikh Abu-Omar el Baghedadi (May Allah accepts him) and other of the Caliphate 's leaders, their sole aim is for followers to question the path of the Caliphate and believe it is different from former leaders and founders, as if these spies know the former leaders or lived among them in the trenches or desert... praise to Allah they failed as per usual

They manipulate people with fake beards from Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula, some of them were known and got burned out quickly, and others they were manipulating secretly till the exit permission, once they get burned out like their predecessors, is granted by the real masters, the dogs of crucifix. Upon on the exit of (...the son of the englishwoman) he advocated killing the caliph and his companions and called him a card-box caliph

Remember the days when the orphans of the apostate Zarqawi called the Caliphate a myth and card-box Caliphate , now it is Jordanian Abu Lahab turn to break his silence and come out of his hiding to play his role

And we say to Jordanian Abu Lahab, we will crush as we crushed el- Makedessi and Abu Kumama with Allah's permission, and prevent you from mentioning our caliph by shoving a shoe in your mouth.... Time will come

The third category: is the one that relentlessly attempts to discredit the supporters and especially the public figures because they are the line of defence against all 3 categories.

God's grace bestowed on the Caliphate a flood of true supporters to fill the gap in social media websites, they are the true voice of the Caliphate , this is why the mule of the Jews Obama and other worshipers of the cross said (we will not defeat the Caliphate unless we defeated its media). They know that the Caliphate possess a big virtual army all over social media, that manages to debunk all accusations from TV channels and accounts. Supporters

kept control over social media and any pig or mercenary for the crusaders has to think a 1000 times before writing one sentence to slander the Caliphate and its leaders

Then the US and the rest of worshipers of the cross deleted social media accounts and telegram channels for Ansar (supporters). It did not deter the supporters, they created 100 accounts instead of 1 and 100 channels instead of 1; they kept publishing and engaged with propaganda campaigns against the worshipers of the cross and their shoes (slur to people who work with them). Supporters are the ones who disseminate and incite with the Caliphate media outlets to target the worshipers of the cross in their own countries, thanks to God 10s of attacks targeted the worshipers of the cross in various places in their own countries...

Worshipers of the cross went mad, they realised their policy of deleting the Caliphate 's supporters accounts have failed, so they deployed their pigs: spies and zawahiri's apostate orphans, who under the veil of support attempts to infiltrate the supporters, gather information on the Caliphate and create an online opposition to the Caliphate following the recommendation of Rand, an American organisation

Thanks to God their attempts failed. A group of honest supporters thwarted these spies and apostates Qaeda orphans, supporters debunked them using proof and conclusive evidence so they attacked and slandered the supporters to be able to infiltrate the supporters and finish their failed mission. Due to their failure and weakness, the American foreign embassy had to support them after they were discovered and failed...

Thanks to God, many honest supporters thwarted these spies and the apostates Qaeda orphans, these suspects are struggling to handle the flood of supporters debunking their accusations and defamations, the supporters rank remained pure, strong and united like the sea who preserves pearls and Coral but spits out dead carrions.



## 7.4 ISIS social-media counter strategy

Since their accounts were being purged from social media, ISIS supporters shared screenshot from this Hassad Ansar article on their telegram channels, shared with me by @Carl (2016) on 15/01/2017. Setting the functionality of Twitter for Ghazu (war) and infiltration, the article shares tips on how not to be immediately recognized as a supporter. It advises to “use generic names and photos, do not follow each other” as telegram is enough for regrouping. Their counter-strategies are discussed briefly in chapter 3

العدد السادس / الجمعة ١٤ ربيع الآخر ١٤٢٨ هـ

**نقطة توضع فوق الحروف**

نقطة توضع فوق الحروف  
إخفي العناصر أختي المتحصنة  
دعكم من التحذيرات والجماعة الموزنة لأفئسها وأعمالها  
ههنا شق للحيف وحيا للظهور ههنا ههنا واحد وهو  
نصرة دين الله والتحذير عن دولة الإسلام ولا تسبعوا  
القبيل والقبيل فالكثير من أصعب القلوب المريضة هدفهم  
ضرب الإخوة المنفصلين ثم عرش أنفسهم كبديل  
حساباتهم معلومة تصح على العام وطعن في الخاص  
تكرار ونعاود نجاتنا بوحدة صفنا وتمسكنا بالولاء  
والبراءة  
إخوة العقيدة إخلصوا أنفسكم واتحابوا فالتحصنة  
إصطفاء من الله وصدق في القول والأعمال

محمد زياد

قال الله تعالى: **يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اخْتَارُوا كَثِيرًا مِّنَ**  
**النِّسَاءِ إِن يَخِفْضَ عَلَيْكُمْ** سورة المجرات  
أحسنوا الظن بمن حولكم واتمسكوا بهم الأعداء، فسوء  
الظن يؤدي إلى الخصومات والعداوات، وتقليل الحلات،  
يقول ابن القيم: **مَنْ خَفِيَ النَّاسَ عَلَى الْخَاصِّ الْمُنِيَّةِ،**  
**وَأَحْسَنَ الظَّنَّ بِهِمْ، سَلِمَتْ نَفْسُهُ،** وانشرح صدره، وعوفي  
قلبه، وحفظه الله من سوء والمكره

أبو عمر المديني

حينما  
يتفلسف ويتشدد المتنطع الذي لا زاد له ولا ملحقين في  
العلم سوى (النقل مع .. عدم العقل)  
خيبي الأراء حسب الأهواء ... ويخالف الشيوخ والأهواء ..  
ويستدبر جهله بغشخ للسان وبذلة الأخلاق ..  
فدعهم الله من لجم أسسنة الكساسسة من الجهال  
والمعتولين على دين الله بخير علم .. يجهلهم وقوة  
بهمهم .. ويثبت عقيدتكم أيها المرجئة

والعلم  
الضبيئة .. هي تمكيد الأهواء فيما خالف الأهواء وما جاء  
به نص وارد واجتهاد أهل الحل والمقد في الفقهاء ..  
خذ باليك من كلمة الفقهاء ليس كل من اعتمد على  
النقل فقيه ..  
ولو فتحنا النقاش معكم في نواحي الإسلام .. فضلا  
عن نقاشكم فيما تنقلوه والله المستعان ..  
لتبين الجهل المركب في نهاية المطاف  
نجدهم يتحدثون عن ادب الحوار وقته الاختلاف ..  
لا بأس .. نذكركم بالقلب أننا لا نعدز بالجهل خاصة في  
الشرك الأكبر ..  
#صدوات\_الأصم

هناك المزيد

**استراتيجية جديدة في حرب**  
**تويتر ومواقع التواصل**

استراتيجية جديدة في حرب تويتر ومواقع التواصل

الجهاد لله والصلوة والسلام على رسول الله وبعد:  
إن أعدائنا يراجلون على التويتر لحربنا، كراجلنا لنصرة  
الخلافة أو أفسد بوليتهم فرق ومجموعات، يهاجمون  
حساباتنا مثنى وفرادى، يخذلونها يوما بعد يوم، وقد  
جربنا عدة طرق لحربهم، محاولنا ثم حاولنا لكننا جميعنا  
كنا نقع في الفخ نفسه من غير أن نعرف أنه  
فخ.  
إننا الآن قد تتبعنا طرق الأعداء في حذف حساباتنا على  
التويتر، ووجدنا أننا نساعد في حذف حساباتنا من غير  
أن ندرى بذلك بأمر:  
- الصورة الشخصية: كمرة المجاهدين وراية العقاب وغيرها  
- الاسم: اسم جهادي أو اسم مكرر ومعروف لمناصب الحساب  
- متابعة أحدنا لأخر (وهذا الشخ هو الذي ندرنا)  
فيما لو أننا أن نرهقهم ونغيظهم وننتصر بإذن الله عليهم  
بما علينا إلا أن تتبع طريقة المنصر المنفرد الخفي.  
وذلك بأن نجعل اسمنا عاديًا غير مشكوك فيه، بصورتنا  
عادية، بالشبيء الأهم أن لا يتبع أحدنا الآخر بما الفائدة  
من متابعة أحدنا للآخر وحساباتنا تحذف كل ساعة  
يكفيها لتجرام التجمع، أما التويتر فهو للغزو فعليها  
غزو الوسوم - نسحق ونصق من قننوات الغزو - ونشر  
الأخبار، علينا الانغماس ودخول الشبيء، بوسنوعهم أن  
يتابعوننا وأحدنا واحد، بأننا سنطرح الخيط الذي كانوا  
يصيدوننا به، وذلك بعدم متابعة أحدنا الآخر  
فيما كنا لا نستطيع أن نقوم حذفهم، فسوف نرهقهم  
ونغيظهم، وذلك بأن يتبعوننا واحدا واحدا  
فطريقة المنصر المنفرد الخفي من الخصل الطرق  
بخصايك يستمر لفترة كبيرة جدا، مع نشرك لأخبار  
الدولة في الوسوم وبين الحسابات.  
فاسكوها فليها سترهتهم بإذن الله  
والحمد لله رب العالمين

فئة روح قلم

Picture 12 ISIS advice to its supporters on how to avert detection on social media

## 7.5 Glossary of Islamic terms

- Dhimmis: Followers of monotheistic books, they should pay taxes
- Adha: A celebration to commemorate God saving of Ismail after ordering Ibrahim to slaughter him, the Islamic version is slightly different than the biblical one
- Syra nabawiya: The biography of the prophet
- Idda: A waiting period for women after divorce and is just for women
- Jahilia: Age of ignorance used to
- Farida: an obligation set by Islamic jurisprudence
- Ijma': Agreement of Islamic religious scholars
- Sura: Chapter of the Quran
- Aya: A Quranic verse
- Tafsir: A book that explain the Qur'anic text
- Awra: What should not be seen, Awra is different for a man and a woman
- Sahewa: Islamic resurgence
- Qur'aniyoun: A new Islamic group that rejects the Hadith and the Syra and abides by the teaching of the Quran
- Hadith: is a collection of saying and teaching of Mohamed
- Kaffir: usually translated as infidels however it does not translate the social implications of such a term and the lesser status in criminal law for example. The capital punishment is applicable in sharia law however a Muslim is exempt if he murders a kaffir. Furthermore, the definition of Kaffir varies according to the standing point of the speaker: a non-Muslim is Kaffir to establishment Islam as repeatedly said by the el-Azhar scholars and to ISIS is anyone who is not with a supporter.

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